SHEPHERDS IN SACKCLOTH

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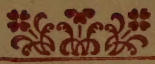

Shepherds in Sackcloth

By SHEILA KAYE-SMITH

THE END OF THE HOUSE OF ALARD

JOANNA GODDEN

ISLE OF THORNS

SUSSEX GORSE

THREE AGAINST THE WORLD

THE TRAMPING METHODIST

THE CHALLENGE TO SIRIUS

STARBRACE

TAMARISK TOWN

SPELL LAND

LITTLE ENGLAND

GREEN APPLE HARVEST

THE GEORGE AND THE CROWN

JOANNA GODDEN MARRIED

THE VILLAGE DOCTOR

By SHEILA KAYE-SMITH

SHEPHERDS IN SACKCLOTH

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1. Mr. Bennet

I

MR. BENNET WAS WORKING IN HIS GARDEN. THE HOPEFUL SPRING CAME TO HIM, FANNING UP THE Rother from the warm shores of Kent. This Spring promised well for his roses, well for his pansies and his peas and his plums—a little less well for the world outside, since it was a Spring of industrial storms and ecclesiastical strife, while nearer home were troubles involved by a change of tradition, a great Manor's loss. But Mr. Bennet was not thinking of the Spring, either benevolent or malevolent. His thoughts followed humbler ways, in fact nothing less lowly than the boiling of the kettle he had left on the kitchen oil-stove for his own and his wife's tea.

Mrs. Bennet had gone into Hawkhurst, the nearest village of more than one-shop size, to buy herself a new hat. When she came back she would be tired and in want of a cup of tea. Emily, the maid, was out, and unless Mr. Bennet made the tea, the weary traveller, with bones ashake and her throat full of dust, would have to wait some forty minutes while the temperature of cold water crept slowly through warmth to a reluctant boiling.

The kettle must have been on nearly forty minutes

now. Ought he to go in and see what was happening? He wanted badly to reach the end of this border first. There were many dead heads to come off, and it would look odd if he left it half finished. It was doubtful when he next would have any free time for gardening, for Sunday was upon him, and a ruri-decanal conference at Goudhurst on Monday. He must do what he could now—before tea; after tea he would have to go down to the church, and then he must call at Goldstrow . . . and there was still a lot of weeding to do—and his sermon to prepare . . . and people seemed to think that a country parson's life was one long dream of idleness. . . . Well, let 'em try it for themselves—let 'em try being gardener and housemaid and plumber and priest and gentleman all on three hundred and fifty pounds a year and a house with eleven bedrooms.

He had come to the end of his row of pansies, and straightened his back regretfully. There was still a lot of clearing up to be done—it was long since he had had such a good day for the garden—but he really would indulge himself no further. Lucy might be home any minute now—the bus was due at the corner at a quarter to five—and it would never do if she came back to find no tea ready for her, or worse still, a kitchen deluge. Sighing deeply, he put on his coat and pottered towards the house.

The house was very peaceful on Emily's afternoon off. Generally a thin sound drifted through it, which

was her singing—her wordless, tuneless singing, with which she accompanied every task, nearly every movement. There had been a time when they had tried to stop or at least reduce it, but that had been long ago when Mrs. Bennet still had thoughts of "training" her, when they had deemed it both unkind and unnecessary to call her Poor Emily as everyone else did. Now they accepted the fact that she was "not like other people," though indignantly rejecting Dr. Gilpin's definition of her as a "hopeless moron," or even the old postman's milder verdict that she was a "poor larmentable natural creature wud a head as good as a gëate post fur thinking."

Anyway, Emily's kitchen was spotlessly clean. It was a large dark room full of those ecclesiastical suggestions which builders in the 'seventies considered indispensable to a Rectory house. A heavily mullioned window fought with the exhausted light that struggled through a laurel thicket, while the fireplace had a Gothic hood descending over the unused, coal-eating range. Set in what little light there was, the kettle boiled with reassuring moderation on the oil cooking stove.

Mr. Bennet made tea in a brown teapot waiting on the tray which he had already spread with a lace-edged cloth. Mrs. Bennet always liked lace on the tea-table, and washed the cloths herself rather than go without it. He smoothed the lace with his big clumsy fingers, and set out very carefully and warily

some little biscuits upon a plate. All he had to do now was to carry the tray into the drawing-room.

They always had tea in the drawing-room in Summer when there was no problem of an extra fire. It was the room they liked best, with its upholstery of faded, flowery chintz, its dimly riotous wall-paper, and the fans and fire-screens that Mrs. Bennet had painted in her youth, and a little tinkling Collard piano that seemed specially made to be played on by elderly, small, ringed fingers, coaxing out Mendelssohn's *Lieder* or the Overture to Weber's *Oberon*.

Mr. Bennet pulled up the blinds, which were always kept drawn in unequal warfare with the greedy sun, sucking the last faint colours out of the walls and furniture. As he did so, the drive-gate clicked, and he felt rising in his heart that warm, comfortable gladness which, throughout thirty-five years of married life, had never failed to welcome his wife's return. He had seldom felt anything less, or anything very much more. There were no crumbled frenzies to compare either gladly or regretfully with this smooth elation. He stood in the window—where the ecclesiastically minded architect had achieved the compromise of a Gothic bow—to watch her come round the laurel bushes at the drive bend. But when she did so, his face fell. It was not his wife at all.

He was rather short-sighted, even with his glasses on, but he could not fail to recognise Mrs. Bennet's small figure, shading, when dressed in her best, from

her yellow hat down through her fawn jacket to her brown skirt. This figure, though also small, started with green at the top instead of yellow, and then from shoulder to hip achieved an even brighter verdure. It advanced rapidly towards the house, at very much his wife's rate and gait, bobbing and dipping along like a bird. Then suddenly he saw that it was Lucy after all—Lucy translated by a new hat and coat, laughing at his perplexed face which she could dimly see through the window. The next minute she was in the room.

"Well, my love! Here I am. And do you see any difference in me?"

"I hardly knew you at first. What have you been doing?"

"I'm wearing my new hat, that's all. You knew I was going to get one at Budgen's, and I simply couldn't resist wearing it home. I never can"—she giggled lightly—"and then this coat . . . of course you'll scold me for being so extravagant, but it really was a bargain. You see it goes perfectly with the hat—almost the same shade of green, only perhaps a little brighter, and I do want something cooler than my jacket, now Summer's coming on. It cost only ten shillings and elevenpence."

"How much was the hat?"

"Five and eleven, and I was prepared to go up to seven and six; so I've really saved a little. . . . But you mustn't scold me, darling, for I've been won-

derfully economical on the whole this year; and I do think it my duty as a clergyman's wife to be always nicely dressed. Otherwise people might think that religion was a depressing sort of thing that wouldn't let us wear pretty clothes, and—and——"

He knew from old experience that only a kiss would stop her chattering mouth.

"My love, I'm not blaming you. How could I? You always manage so well and look so nice. I think I like you in green for a change."

"Yes, it's a long time since I've worn green; not since that green coat and skirt I bought when Miss Pierce was married—the one I had dyed black just before the war. It lasted me right up to a couple of years ago—as knickers, I mean, for I couldn't go on wearing the skirt after it caught on a thorn bush that day I came back from Lossenham by the fields, so——"

"I've got your tea ready for you, dear."

"Oh, thank you. That will be nice. I'm dying for a cup of tea. You're always so thoughtful, Harry."

"Well, I want a cup of tea myself, and Emily's out, you know."

"Yes, thank goodness! . . . Poor Emily."

2

The old couple sat down to their tea. They did not really look so very old—not their full sixties. The

Rector's hair was grey, almost white, but thick as a thatch upon his head, while Mrs. Bennet's hair was still the faded straw-colour that had once been gold. She showed at every point a direct contrast to her husband. While he was big and stooping, slow in his movements, inclined to fumble, she was small, erect and rapid, lavish of gesture. While he was deliberate in speech, deep-voiced, and given to rumbling laughter, she chattered and giggled shrilly—mastiff and poll-parrot; thus an unsympathising wit had once defined them. But in one point they were alike. Their two so-different faces—his dark-complexioned and heavy-featured, hers still wearing the afterglow of her girlhood's pink and white—had both something of the alert, watchful innocence of children. They were faces of those who accept at the hands of life both good and evil, who wonder but do not criticise, whose fears and doubts have been purged by a simplicity which is almost faith.

"Well, my dear, and what have you been doing this afternoon? Anybody called?"

"I've been gardening, and nobody's called, unless you count two tramps as callers."

"Tramps . . . what kind were they?"

"Oh, the usual kind. They'd come from Cranbrook, and were working me in with Hawkhurst and Wittersham, I gather."

"Did they tell good stories?"

"Oh, quite. They earned their shilling."

The Bennets had long ceased to give alms on any moral system. They paid for "stories" as a magazine editor pays for them, not because they are true but because they are creditable pieces of fiction.

"Did you give them a shilling each?"

"No; because they came together and told the same story. They had both apparently once been servers at St. Bartholomew's, Brighton. But one said he used to know Mr. Naesmyth at Skelborough."

"That was clever of him. I think that deserved another shilling, dear."

"No it didn't, and you're an unscrupulous woman—paying tramps for lies."

"But they're such clever lies and they must have spent a lot of time and trouble finding out about you. Besides, if one wasn't unscrupulous, one would never help anybody—at least not tramps."

"You're quite right, and some day I shall develop scruples and save a lot of money."

They went on with their tea in silence for a few minutes. Then Mrs. Bennet said:

"So you haven't been up to Goldstrow?"

"No. I thought I might as well take the afternoon in the garden. Those side beds are getting terribly ragged . . . and I can easily fit in Goldstrow after church."

"Won't that be rather late for Mrs. Millington—if she's ill?"

"She's not ill. The whole village is agreed about that, and the village must be right. It always is."

"Oh, Harry!"

"Well, isn't it? As it happens, Dr. Gilpin passed the time of day with me over the hedge, and he tells me she's only got a cold—a heavy cold. She'll be quite well in a day or two."

"Then I suppose it won't matter your going late. But, Harry, do be careful what you say, and keep on the right side of her. After all, perhaps we were a little to blame. We ought to have told her about Sue."

"No, we ought not. What Sue did in her first situation four years ago is no business of anybody who employs her now. Good heavens! Is the poor girl never going to be allowed to forget the past?"

"Yes, it does seem hard. But please be careful, dear. Don't offend her—with the Garden Party coming on, and the Parish Fund in such low water."

"My love, trust me. I'll be very diplomatic. I've no wish to offend her—and not only because of her money. I like that girl of hers, and I want to get her."

"Get her! What for?"

"For the Church, my dear Lucy—for a better sort of life and religion than her aunt's."

"Oh, Harry . . ." Mrs. Bennet did not care to express, even to herself, any doubt of her husband's prowess as a fisher of men. But she found it difficult to visualise the situation that he now held up to her

all dim in the glory of pastoral hope. "It would be nice if you could," she finished lamely.

"Yes . . . and why not? Theresa's a wild, self-willed young thing. But that's just the sort that makes such a good Christian in the end."

"I know, dear, and really . . . but of course . . . I mean, it's rather awkward . . . I wish you could do something with her soon. I met her the other day, pushing her bicycle up the hill between the two Gasson boys, and when I tried to make her join me instead, she said she was going with them to Rolvenden Fair. The village is quite shocked at the way she runs wild and goes about with the boys."

"She can't come to any harm with the young Gassons. They're decent, sensible lads."

"Yes, but it isn't only them. Mrs. Boorman was saying in the bus this afternoon that two days ago she walked into the Plough, all among the men in the bar, and asked for a pint of ale as bold as brass. Mr. Boorman wouldn't serve her, of course. He persuaded her to go into the parlour, and Mrs. Boorman brought her half a pint, just to taste, since she was so eager. I don't know what Mrs. Millington would say if she heard."

"I hope she won't hear. But of course she will if Mrs. Boorman goes shouting about it in the Hawkhurst bus. Really I think there's everything to be said for that poor girl. She must have a terribly dull life up at Goldstrow, and not a soul to know outside it.

There are practically no young people of her own class in the district, so naturally she goes about with the Gassons and their kind. We might ask her in here now and again, for dinner and tea. But we're only old fogeys."

"What a difference it would have made to her if our Sylvia had lived. She would have been such a lovely friend."

"A little too old for her, I'm afraid."

"Yes, of course. . . . Sylvia would have been nearly twenty-nine."

"Married by this time, perhaps."

"Yes indeed, I expect so. I'm sure she would have grown up a beautiful girl."

It was now more than twenty-five years since the Bennets had lost their only daughter.

3

When tea was over, Mr. Bennet dried the tea things which his wife washed up. Then he put on a shabby old hat of the kind known as "gentle shepherd," and walked down to his church in Delmonden.

The village lay between the church and the Rectory, a small homely street running downhill towards the Rother. At this point the Rother is one with the Kent Ditch, and a boundary line between Kent and Sussex. On either side of it lie the marshes that are the width of the mighty river it once was, and beyond

them the gently rising fields that were once its banks. This evening the marshes were yellow with sunshine and buttercups, and on the hills the young woods lifted torches of green fire to the sky. The white of the hawthorn and the wild cherry flashed from their borders, and from the hedges of the seaward road that crossed the Rother at Delmonden bridge.

The church stood almost on the marsh itself, the last of Kent. It was a small, mysterious place, without tower or steeple, its roof sprawling nearly to the ground on either side. In reality it was not a complete church, but the chancel of a church once planned but only partly built, by the monks of Canterbury—those lusty builders who had spiked the wastes of Romany Marsh with soaring temples and wakened inland echoes with their new-foundered bells. At Delmonden, however, they had not been successful. Boundaries were then ill-defined, and the Rother valley not only lay uncertainly in Kent, but uncertainly in the diocese of Canterbury. The successor of St. Richard laid claim to it from his cathedral church at Chichester, and the monks of Battle Abbey, grown poor and envious since Becket's martyrdom, resented the coming of these new-rich guardians of this new-made shrine, to raise up a steeple in a land where the steeples had hitherto been raised by the faith and good-will of Sussex.

As the result of prolonged altercation, and some personal interference on the part of one Richard Dalyngruge of Bodiham Castle on the Rother, the

monks departed, leaving behind them a mere chancel. Battle Abbey was too poor to build a nave, so the chancel remained—looking down the marshes to the sunrise. Neither St. Thomas nor St. Richard claimed it now, for after having spent some hundreds of years in undisputed possession of Canterbury, it had in the eighteen-eighties been handed over to the newly formed diocese of Maidstone. No one had ever thought of finishing it, for the village of Delmonden had not grown any bigger or shown any signs of crowding it as it stood. In the late nineteenth century, the hand of the restorer was ruthlessly laid upon it—a Victorian-Gothic sanctuary was built out at the east end, with a vestry, and a hideous and terrifying heating apparatus.

It could not be called beautiful by any stretch of courtesy or imagination. The monks of Canterbury had built in a hurry, with one eye on Bodiham Castle, while the Victorian restorers had had only too much time. Of recent years, the parish had sunk, and there had been little money to spend, though the old Squire —now supplanted by Mrs. Millington at Goldstrow— had devoted a learned and sensitive taste to the church's improvement. An English altar, darkly hung with a blue-green frontal and riddells, was furnished austerely in lacquered brass. The East Window was mercifully unpictured, save for some ancient coats of arms. The War Memorial—a humble crucifix above a prayer-desk set round with bowls and pots of flowers—had

the merits of simplicity and homeliness and constant use. The font was Victorian, monstrous on a thirteenth-century base; the seats were pitch-pine, littered with huge hassocks surviving from Hanoverian pews.

Mr. Bennet loved it all—old sprawling roof, tuppenny chancel, æsthetic altar, hybrid font, pitch-pine seats, Hanoverian hassocks—Middle Gothic, Churchwarden Gothic, Victorian, Georgian, Sarum—he loved it all, and was aware of no dissonance in its discordant parts, all of which were harmonised for him by love and use. For more than twenty-five years now he had watched over it, seeking its order and prosperity. Though visiting priests sometimes hinted their thought that he could have done more in twenty-five years, he himself felt that he had gone quite fast enough. Visiting priests did not know how slow were country ways, how catastrophic country changes from the blue bed to the brown, from the black stole to the green; how that uprooting a hymn was like uprooting a tree; how new lights were as strange and troubling as new stars.

In the porch was nailed up a notice in the Rector's spidery handwriting, beginning with a quotation from the Book of Common Prayer: "and because it is requisite, that no man should come to the Holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet conscience . . ." and ending "in accordance with the above, the Rector will be in church every Satur-

day evening at half past five, to hear confessions and give spiritual advice to any who may need it." This evening he went in as he had gone in almost every Saturday for twenty-five years, put on his cassock and surplice, and sat down beside a prayer-desk set against the west wall—and, as on almost every Saturday, he sat there alone.

There had never been any special eagerness on the part of his flock to avail themselves of the power of the keys. Children round about the confirmation age came sometimes before the big church festivals, and occasionally in Summer a stranger would drift in, holidaying from the more zealous religion of the South Coast. But that was all; except, of course, the three old people who never failed him—Mrs. Iggulsden, Mrs. Body, and Davy Spong. Those were the three whom sometimes, in moments of depression, he would call his three sheaves of wheat in a harvest of straw. For twenty-five years he had watched them growing and ripening, and they were very old now. He ministered to Mrs. Iggulsden at her bedside, and Mrs. Body and Mr. Spong came out only with the bright weather. One day they would all three pass on out of sight, ahead of him, leaving him alone with his harvest of straw.

The door stood open, showing him the evening full of sunlight, and allowing the cluck of farmyards to drift into the church. He prayed as he sat there alone,

and read from a little book called "The Hidden Life." He always sat there for half an hour, and his people always knew where they could find him. Towards the end of the half hour, he could hear footsteps, and shadows moved across the brightness of the door. They were there outside, anxious to consult him, but waiting till he looked less dangerous. With a wry smile, he dragged out his watch—a difficult process under cassock and surplice, and crumpling them badly, so that he looked a queer bunchy old figure as he stood up at last, put aside his stole, and went out onto the porch.

4

"Good evenun, Sir."

At first he did not recognise the old labouring man who approached him. Then he remembered him as the drover at Palster Court, over in Wittersham Parish.

"Good evening, Mr. Pix. How are you? It's a long time since I've seen you up at Delmonden."

"Surelye, Sir, 'tis a long time. I'm gitting an old man, wud trouble in my böans, and my work's all I'm able to do, stepping up to Palster dis cruel weather. Today's de fust day I've felt in heart to come a bit furder, so I thought I'd come aräound and see as to my being put in on de electric roll."

"You couldn't be put on till next year, I'm afraid.

The roll was revised at Easter. And anyhow, you don't live in this parish. You belong to Wittersham."

"But I döant never go dere, Sir."

"Nor do you ever come here."

"But dis is de church I do favour, Sir."

"Well, I'm afraid you'll have to favour it inside as well as out, or you can't be on the electoral roll—a whole year's regular attendance. How should you like that?"

"I shouldn't like dat at all, Sir. I'm gitting an old man, wud trouble in my böans. I can't attend regular nowhere, and reckon it comes tedious hard on us old folks if we äun't allowed on de electric roll, seeing as when we wur young and could attend regular dere wurn't none."

The old brown face, set with its encircling frill of whisker between bent shoulders and a round black hat very like Mr. Bennet's, was working with disappointment. No gentle shepherd could send away this poor old sheep uncomforted, though properly speaking, he belonged to another flock.

"If I were you, Mr. Pix, I'd get myself put on the roll at Wittersham; that will be quite easy, as you're a parishioner. You go and see Mr. Fanshawe at the Rectory, and he'll arrange it for you."

"And I wöan't have to attend regular?"

"No, not if you're in the parish."

"Den dat do seem de easier way, döan't it, Sir?"

"Yes, it does. But"— he felt that so much eagerness must be due to some misconception as to benefits received—"don't make any mistake. I'm afraid you get nothing out of being on the roll beyond the power to vote at the Parish Meeting once a year."

"I döan't want to vote at no meetings, Sir. Reckon dat wouldn't do my böans any good. But I've taken a powerful fancy to be on de electric roll, and now reckon I'll be on, and it'll be a gurt joy and pride to me and to my old woman. Thank you kindly, Sir, and good evenun to you."

"Good evening, Mr. Pix."

He turned to the others who were waiting—signed one or two papers, promised a hospital letter, and interviewed one of his Sunday-school teachers, who had discovered that certain of her flock took advantage of the bus service between Delmonden and Hawkhurst to go into chapel on Sunday evenings—"I can't stop them, Miss Apps—either them or the bus."

Then he went back into the vestry, and took off his cassock and surplice, in preparation for his walk to Goldstrow. His Saturday evenings nearly always ended like this. He came as the physician of souls, but was forced instead to minister to bodies. He came as the Lord's ambassador, but was required to act as an English magistrate. Only a few desired the spiritual gifts he offered; all that most of his people wanted was his help in the little pettifogging business of

their day—their little ambitions, their little needs, their little controversies. Thus it had always been, and for a long time now he had recognised it and accepted it.

As he tried before the dim looking-glass to make himself presentable for his visit to high places, his mind went back to the day early in his ministry when he had first learned this lesson. He saw himself a young, eager, newly ordained priest, leaning over the bed where a miner's wife lay dying in the Durham pit village of his first curacy. He heard her faint voice murmuring—"I want . . . I want . . ."

He had been so sure what she wanted, so proud that he could give it to her, this poor soul, setting out on her lonely journey. He had stooped close to her panting mouth.

"What is it? What can I do for you?" and he remembered how he had pictured himself hurrying back to the big dark church to fetch her the Sacrament, and then sending her forth with words of comfort and committal, so that she left a glory behind her.

"I want . . . I want . . . some tabioca pudding."

That incident seemed now to typify the course of his ministry. And just as then he had not dared despise her poor request, but had immediately set about getting her what she wanted, fetching it himself from a neighbour's kitchen, so now he would not fail these souls who, when he offered them the Bread of Life, asked for tabioca pudding instead. It was better than giving them nothing. He ought to be thankful that

there was at least some way in which he could be their minister.

5

The Rector could never approach Goldstrow without a sense of loss. Sir John Fleet, the "old Squire," last of five generations of Fleets that had owned Goldstrow, had hardly been as conspicuous in the neighbourhood as his position warranted. By natural tastes a scholar, the succeeding blows of Lloyd George's Land Act and the Great War had forced him into a reclusion of poverty. Goldstrow, both house and estate, had fallen on bad times; but he himself could always be found by those who sought him out in his heritage—a man and a brother.

Between him and the Rector had existed a very real friendship. Though they had few circumstances and interests in common, their temperaments agreed, and Mr. Bennet could always be sure of finding at Goldstrow good wine, good talk, and good understanding. The Squire's death had meant the breaking of a tradition in Delmonden. Though poverty had spoiled his part as Squire and landlord, his mere living at the Manor House had stood for something venerable and socially constructive. The Fleets of Goldstrow had been a part of Delmonden's social order, and this man's death was the death of the Fleets and the death of Goldstrow.

For some time the Manor's fate had been uncertain. Distant heirs would hear of nothing but selling it, and Goldstrow hung on the edge of nameless dishonours. Hotel proprietors and school mistresses inspected it—it was even bargained over as a possible Sanatorium. Luckily these schemes all came to nothing, and Mr. Bennet, together with most of Delmonden, was relieved to hear that it had been bought by the widow of a wealthy London banker.

Preliminary rumours had promised well for Mrs. Millington. She was rich, but not newly rich. Indeed, she came of a family of landed proprietors. She had been brought up at the Hall and knew the ways of Squirearchy. She would put the seedy old house in order and revive the failing life of its farms. Rumour also said that she was a Good Churchwoman. The old Squire's churchmanship had been chiefly æsthetic, confined to his efforts to chasten and beautify St. Thomas à Becket's, Delmonden. But Mrs. Millington was well known as a subscriber to church charities and missionary societies. Her husband had been churchwarden of a fashionable London church, and first cousin to the Bishop of Glastonbury. Mr. Bennet dreamed of half-crowns in his collection plate, among all the pennies and halfpennies, and guineas on his subscription lists among all the shillings.

Rumour had, it proved, a little exaggerated the lady's good points. She was certainly interested in her estate, but her ideas dated largely from the times when,

living in her father's house, she had watched a very different administration from any that was possible in rural England after the War. Now all that which used to be bestowed of bounty was demanded of right. Mrs. Millington liked to be bountiful; she liked to give her maids new dress-lengths at Christmas; she liked to send soup and jelly to sick folk, mufflers and flannel petticoats to old ones; she liked to give sides of bacon to large families and buns to children. But she did not like to give wages which would have enabled everybody to buy dress-lengths, soup, jelly, mufflers, flannel petticoats, bacon and buns for themselves. However, her tenants suffered her, because she mended their roofs and put their farms in order.

In religious matters, too, she preferred bounty to equity. She was generous—the Rector's hopes had not been disappointed—but her gifts were not free. She considered that she bought with them certain rights in the church and the parish; moreover she did not altogether like the services at Delmonden, which were very different from the services at St. Smaragdus's, South Kensington. Mr. Bennet lived in a constant strain of propitiation.

The strain was upon him this evening. There were words that he wanted to say, that he felt himself bound to say, and there were words that he must say if he wanted to keep her favour, her guineas, and her half-crowns. He was ashamed of himself for his own restraints—he knew that, ideally, he ought to be snap-

ping his fingers at her money. But quite blankly and literally he could not afford to do so. The organ would have to be repaired this Summer, and it was most unlikely that his parishioners would be able to raise the funds, while next Winter something would have to be done about the heating apparatus if they didn't want either to be frozen out or blown up. No, his conscience must take a larger view—a view of Delmonden parish and its needs, rather than those relations of strict integrity desirable between a Rector and his Squire.

Mrs. Millington received him in her bedroom, but she was not in bed. She was sitting in an armchair by the fire, a lace scarf over her abundant and beautiful grey hair. She was a handsome woman, grey-haired, brown-eyed, and delicate of skin, having at the first glance an air of patrician fragility which a closer inspection denied.

"Good evening, Mrs. Millington."

"Good evening, Mr. Bennet. I'm glad you've been able to come. But I was expecting you to tea."

"I'm so sorry, but my wife was over at Hawkhurst for the afternoon, and it was our maid's day out, so I had to stay at home. We get a great many callers, you see."

"I see—and I suppose that was why you couldn't send anybody over with a message, to let me know."

"I'm afraid not. It was our maid's day out . . . and as if it mattered to you whether I came or not. You

haven't got to worry about making extra work or buying extra tea in order to receive a guest."

The last two-thirds of this reply were uttered secretly in Mr. Bennet's heart. He found that it made things easier if he allowed his thoughts to say what his lips must not. He could just bear to dissemble before others, but he could not bear to dissemble before his own soul.

"Oh, well, of course I understand, and I hope it hasn't been awkward for you to come over now. But I'm anxious to talk to you about this unfortunate girl. It really is a most deplorable business, for now she has been five months in my employment and it would be difficult to exaggerate the harm she may have done."

"In what way, Mrs. Millington? I trust you don't find she's been misbehaving?"

"How do I know? Servants always stand by one another. But think of the influence to which my other maids have been exposed."

"Not a bad influence, I assure you. She is a nice-minded, well-spoken girl."

"Really, Mr. Bennet, you surprise me! One would think you didn't know she had committed an abominable sin."

"Four years ago."

"That makes no difference to me. I employ only respectable girls. And I may add now that I consider you behaved very strangely in not telling me all about

her when I came here. I should never have engaged her if I'd known."

"No, you wouldn't—and that's why I didn't tell you," said Mr. Bennet's heart. His lips said: "Susan Lamb brought you a good reference from her last employer, and had, I believe, an equally good one from the employer before that. I really didn't think it fair to drag up the poor girl's past. God has forgiven it, so man may as well forget it."

Mrs. Millington looked shocked.

"I really don't see that you need introduce the Almighty's name into this, Mr. Bennet. The facts are that Susan Lamb has had a baby without being married, and that nobody here told me a word about it when I engaged her; and I shouldn't have known now if a friend from Bulverhythe, where apparently it all happened, hadn't recognised her and undeceived me."

"Evil-tongued, gossiping cat! The Lord rebuke her," cried Mr. Bennet's inner voice. After which he was able to say aloud:

"I've known Susan ever since she was a baby. Her parents used to live here before they went into Bulverhythe, and they are in every way worthy, respectable people. Barring this one lapse, I've heard nothing but good of her—and it happened four years ago. Also, as you probably know, the baby died. Poor little girl, there's really no reason why she shouldn't put the past right behind her, and perhaps in time marry some good young man——"

"Who will probably be treated as I have been, and told nothing about her."

Mr. Bennet flushed.

"His position would be a little different," he managed to say.

"Well, I really do consider that I've been treated badly, as nothing would have induced me to engage her if I'd known of her past."

"But now you do know, won't you help her to leave the past behind her? May I beg you not to send her away? I understand that she is a good little maid-servant."

"I have no fault to find with her service. It's her morals that I object to, and I should have thought that with you, as with me, they would have counted more than mere efficiency. No, Mr. Bennet, I cannot possibly keep her. I have my other maids to consider—to say nothing of my niece. I have no right to expose them to contamination."

"Contamination! From Susan Lamb!" scoffed Mr. Bennet's indignant heart. Aloud he said:

"Very well, Mrs. Millington. I shall say no more. I shall only ask you just one thing. May I see Susan before I leave this house?"

"I'm afraid you can't do that. She's gone."

"Gone! Then why did you send for me? This discussion has been a farce. You have the effrontery to summon a busy priest a mile across the country for no reason at all except that you want to scold him

for not having thought it necessary to rake up the whole past of a wretched girl who was fool enough to want to enter your service. . . ."

He turned crimson with his unspoken fury. He must go at once, or he'd be saying it all out loud. Drat the woman! She was impossible.

"Yes, I thought it best for her to go at once," continued Mrs. Millington, "best for all of us. It's awkward enough in any circumstances having servants about the place when they're under notice. I'd have let her stay till tomorrow, but there's no train into Bulverhythe on Sunday. If she hadn't gone today she'd have had to stop over the week-end. I've given her her wages. There's no need to think I've turned her out without a penny—though I should have been within my rights if I had. I assure you, she was extremely grateful."

Luckily for Mr. Bennet at that point they were interrupted. The door opened, and a voice said:

"It's me. May I come in, Aunt Eleanor?"

Mrs. Millington's expression changed. She lost her look of displeased great lady, and into her eyes came something eager and anxious, that made Mr. Bennet for a single moment almost pity her.

"Come in, Theresa; there's only the Rector here."

A rough red head came poking round the door, a mane of hair, curling and flaming above a face in which youth and health glowed so brightly as to be almost enough beauty in themselves. Mr. Bennet

stood up as Miss Theresa Silk, Mrs. Millington's niece, followed her head and shoulders into the room.

"Hullo!" she cried. "I knew you were here. I saw your hat on the hall seat."

Her greeting seemed to melt away the hard, indignant mood of the last few minutes. The grim line of his mouth stretched into a smile.

"So you guessed I couldn't be far off? You're getting an expert detective, I see."

"Have you read a book called *The Sneaker* or something, by somebody called Edgar Wallace? That's all about detectives, and easier to read than most books."

"Theresa, don't expose yourself," said Mrs. Millington.

"I'm not. Mr. Bennet knows I can't read books, and he says some people are made that way and there's no use worrying."

Mrs. Millington looked as if she did not altogether approve of this advice.

"When I was your age I was a great reader. I think I'd read everything that Charlotte Yonge ever wrote, as well as Scott and Dickens. I was very fond of sewing and embroidery, too, and so was your poor mother."

"Then I guess I take after my papa," said Theresa, easily. She was leaning up against the foot of Mrs. Millington's bed, her vigorous, ungainly young figure almost hidden under the big ulster she wore belted

round her. She was about eighteen, and had not yet quite finished growing. Her hands and feet were large in proportion to the rest of her, her joints were coltish and her movements clumsy.

"Theresa!" cried Mrs. Millington, "your boots!"

Both Theresa and Mr. Bennet looked at them and at the stains of cow dung on the carpet.

"Where have you been?" questioned her aunt.

"Oh, nowhere in particular—just round and about the place."

"You've been in somebody's farmyard," thought Mr. Bennet to himself, but he would not say it aloud, because, though really he deplored as much as his wife, Theresa's association with the country boys, he would not make a culprit of her to Mrs. Millington.

"Well, go and take them off at once, and change into something respectable for dinner, if you're going to have it upstairs with me."

"Oh, Aunt, not now. It's only just after six, and such a lovely evening. I want to go out."

"But you've been out all day."

"No, I haven't. I was carpentering in the toolshed all the morning—I'm making a model of the Bulverhythe bus. Now I want to stretch my legs. So I thought I'd bike up to the village and hear the news."

"What news?"

"Didn't you know that Delmonden's playing Beth-

ersden at cricket this afternoon—the first match of the season? You knew, didn't you, Mr. Bennet?"

"Oh, yes—but the results won't be out till the team comes home, and that won't be till after supper. But if you want to stretch your legs, Miss Theresa, why not walk back with me? I must be going now, and if you'll keep me company, I promise Mrs. Millington you shall be home in time to change your dress."

6

Theresa and the Rector set out for the village together —he bare-headed, she with his "gentle shepherd" hat set grotesquely on her fiery hair. That this big, clumsy hoyden, all freckles and tan, should have been named after the burning Carmelite seemed rather a bad joke to Mr. Bennet. It could doubtless be accounted for by the fact that the Theresas are very like the Mabels at the baptismal age; but this Theresa herself saw the incongruity into which she had grown, and had asked to be called Terry, a request which both her aunt and Mr. Bennet denied.

"I refuse to hash up that noble name," he had told her, "even though it oughtn't to be yours. I'd rather you kept it and tried to grow like it—Theresa of the Flaming Heart. Meanwhile I'll call you Theresa of the Flaming Head and perhaps some day your head will set your heart on fire."

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" Theresa had shouted at that.

This evening they discussed the chances of Delmonden against Bethersden on the cricket field.

"I wish I could have gone," said she, "but there wasn't any way of getting over. I asked Bob Sayer to take me on the pillion of his motor bike, but he wouldn't."

"Quite right, too—just what I'd have expected him to say. He's a sensible lad."

"But why shouldn't he have taken me?"

"Because, my dear, it doesn't look well for you to go about like that with the village boys."

"I don't go about with them. I merely want to go to places, and ask them to take me, which isn't at all the same thing, especially as they won't do it."

"Why do you want to go to places?"

"To see what they're like and join in any fun that's going. I want to go to Benenden Fair next Thursday. I love fairs—but it's too far to bike over and be back to lunch. Aunt always gets fussy if I'm not in to meals."

"That's quite natural. I think she allows you a great deal of freedom, considering how—" he had nearly said, "how she bullies everyone else."

"Oh, she doesn't know what I'm doing half the time. She's busy with her housekeeping and her tenants and her committees and all that sort of thing. I'd be simply horribly dull if I relied on her for company."

"How did you manage when you lived in London?"

"Oh, I was at school then—away most of the time. London itself was beastly—no fun at all. I love this place, but if I don't talk to the village people, who am I to talk to? There isn't anyone else."

"There are the Ingpens and the Cheesmans—both with girls of your own age."

"I can't bear them; they talk of nothing but men. I hate talking about men."

"Well, what about Dr. and Mrs. Gilpin?"

"Oh, they're too old."

As Dr. Gilpin was about twenty years younger than Mr. Bennet, there didn't seem any good suggesting himself and his wife as possible companions.

"Why not take up some sort of work? You might interest yourself in one or two of your aunt's concerns and help her run them."

"Committees and clergymen? Good Lord, no! I hate all that sort of thing."

"Then stop wearing a clergyman's hat and boring yourself with a clergyman's company. It's time you went home, if you're to change your dress."

Mr. Bennet was annoyed. In vain he told himself that the anti-clericalism of a girl of eighteen ought not to be taken seriously. She saw that she had displeased him.

"Oh, don't be angry. It shows how nice I think you if I forget you're a clergyman."

This did not help at all. Mr. Bennet held out his hand for his hat.

"I promised your aunt I'd send you back in time."

"But you're angry with me."

"Of course I am. You've insulted my office. But don't worry—I'm used to that sort of thing and will have forgotten all about it in an hour or two."

"If you'd seen Aunt's awful Reverend Grant you'd understand what I feel. I can't help it. When I've met a few more clergymen like you, I expect I'll change my mind. Meanwhile I like you terribly, so please don't go on being angry longer than you can help."

"Very well, perhaps I won't."

"You promise?"

He could not help smiling at her as she stood before him like some mediæval picture of the sun—round grinning face and fiery rays of hair. Poor child! She was queerly out of place in her aunt's household; it was difficult to realise they were kin. He understood that Mrs. Millington's sister had married disastrously. Perhaps Theresa "took after" the disaster.

He went on his solitary way up Delmonden Hill. He felt tired—a long, battling, fruitless evening, like so many others.

At the Rectory, Mrs. Bennet had cooked a "surprise" in the shape of Welsh rarebit, and he felt a little better when she told him he looked exhausted and insisted on opening a bottle of Bass. After supper he helped her wash up, and, before they had finished,

Poor Emily came in with the news that Delmonden had won the cricket match.

"Who told you, Emily?"

"My little Arthur told me. Mr. Boorman took him over to see the play, and he said it was fine. Young Southerden made eighty-seven runs."

"My little Arthur" was the quite imaginary son of the virgin Emily, but, strangely enough, the information he brought nearly always proved correct.

"I'm thinking you'll be wanting some wood chopped, Mum."

"Oh, no, Emily. Everything's ready for tomorrow. You must go to bed now."

Another of Emily's eccentricities was a desire to perform unnecessary tasks at unusual hours. She was however amenable to command if not to reason, and went off to bed without another word.

Thus the day ended for Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. An hour later they were both lying side by side in their twin iron bedsteads, in their big, bare, cold, Gothic bedroom. Mrs. Bennet was asleep, but her husband, as usual, lay awake a little longer. He had definitely put from him the shadows of the day, but his mind lay as it were suspended above sleep, the lake in whose healing waters he would soon be lost, to rise from them tomorrow full of trust in the new day. At the bottom of that lake all the past day's shadows would be left to lie forgotten, just as some day he hoped to

leave his whole life's shadows to drown in an even deeper lake.

7

Theresa Silk liked Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. In her vocabulary they were "old pets." Sometimes she found the Rector rather too heavily facetious and his wife a little boring with her chatter, but she liked them more than anyone else in Delmonden. She was sorry that she had annoyed Mr. Bennet by "insulting his office," whatever that might mean. She had not intended it, but since she had done it, and could see by his face that he was really affronted, she felt sorry, and would do her best to atone.

She decided that she would go to church on Sunday morning. Usually such a course was inevitable, but Theresa had staked much on her aunt's illness, which would providentially keep her at home. She had meant to set out ostensibly for church but actually for a walk down the marshes, exploring the country of hawthorn and buttercups that stretched a white and golden mystery into the east. She had trusted the Rector not to betray her if he noticed her absence, but now she would not strain his generosity.

Accordingly, hatted and gloved, she set out shortly before ten, feeling a little exalted after bidding her aunt good-bye with an unexpectedly clear conscience. She promised to notice if the Bourners were in church

—lately they had given up coming, and as they were tenants, Mrs. Millington felt it her duty to enquire into the matter—if the Rector gave out the notice about the Melanesian Mission that she had specially sent in to him, and if they kept St. Mark's day or the Fourth Sunday after Easter—the two festivals coinciding and Mrs. Millington's vote going to St. Mark.

At Delmonden, the hour of eleven had not acquired the religious significance it has in towns. At a few minutes to ten the bells were ringing for the service that began at the half hour. The Canterbury monks had built no steeple, so it was only a little mean peal of tubular bells, with a haunting minor note in its descending scale, that crept out over the marsh to meet the hearty chimes that Sussex was sending across from Northiam.

Theresa walked sedately, conscious of hat and gloves and thin tight shoes. In her hand she clasped a Book of Common Prayer and a copy of Hymns Ancient and Modern. The only hymn she liked was "Onward Christian Soldiers," which she could hardly expect today, unless by a lucky chance the Rector considered it appropriate to St. Mark. The other hymns were all so thin and frail—just tum, tum, tum, tum, tee. She liked hymns that went: Rum, tum, rumpty, rumpitty, tum, like those the Salvation Army sang. It would be fun to belong to the Salvation Army, and play and sing at street corners and shake a tambourine. . . .

The church was nearly a mile from Goldstrow. In

order to reach it she had first to walk down an old narrow lane that wound towards the village past the Rectory. Then she found herself going down Delmonden hill in a thin straggle of folk, all churchward bound. She viewed them disapprovingly. They looked a dull crowd, all in their best clothes. There went Dr. Gilpin and his wife, and Mr. and Mrs. Apps, who kept the general shop, and the Rector's idiot servant, Poor Emily, with the Vidlers from Reedbed Farm and the Batups from Kitchenhour, and other honest families. Why didn't the gipsies go to church? There was an encampment of them at Marsh Quarter. She supposed they never went. But she was sorry for it; she would like to see a church full of gipsies. . . .

As she came to the churchyard gate, she realised that it was only a quarter past ten. She didn't want to have to sit in church for a quarter of an hour before the service began. It would be long enough without any such preface—Mr. Bennet was sometimes terribly slow. Normally she would have had to sit staring and fidgeting beside her aunt while the Sunday-school children clattered into their places, and the old folk established themselves with collected hassocks, and the young folk hung chattering round the porch, waiting for the last bell before they came in. Today she was blessedly free, and could go for a walk on the marsh if she chose.

Just beyond the church a grassy track led under the hill that had once been the Rother's shore, to Lossen-

ham, a tiny collection of houses about half a mile from Delmonden. Theresa turned into the shelter of a rough hedgerow, where a milky way of chervil and cow-parsley floated on either side almost shoulder high. It was the beginning of the path she had chosen before contrition towards Mr. Bennet had made her decide on church. She would just go down it as far as the houses. She wanted to see who lived there. She had been told that a family of house-bound gipsies had a cottage at Lossenham.

Theresa was in most ways younger than eighteen. Mrs. Millington had always treated her as a child, and when they lived in London a governess had been engaged for her holidays. This poor woman, Theresa had dragged in search of adventure to Berwick Market and Petticoat Lane, to Smithfield and Mile End, and even on an abortive expedition to Limehouse, which they were persuaded to abandon by a policeman of whom they asked the way. The governess had always been a cypher, an unwilling but obedient dog at the heels of her charge's enterprise.

Theresa loved strange places and queer people—fired by the spark of burnt-out memories, which she could not be sure were memories or only dreams. . . . "Of course, she was too young to know—it's a great mercy," Mrs. Millington would murmur to more than one friend.

She found the country infinitely more exciting and

adventurous than the town—partly because she could wear old clothes and ride a bicycle, and partly because the governess was gone. She now had no unwilling accomplice to be dragged about, and coaxed and bullied into silence. The painful possession of a conscience even at second hand need no longer embarrass her. "Thank heaven, I can lie naturally," was the pious ejaculation of her heart. Her aunt, busy and careful with her old-established interests and her newly acquired occupations, left her very much to herself. Theresa was now supposed to be grown up, and it was taken for granted, without much evidence, that she comported herself as a grown-up person. Mrs. Millington never imagined that her niece was still so much a child that she was scarcely even a girl, but lived in that unawakened land where the shout of the boy heroes still stirs the soul, the shout of all the boys of Henty and Marryat and Fenimore Cooper, with an echo of the shout of the gipsy and the big drum at the Fair.

Theresa had come to where, beyond the last cottage, a stile and a footbridge link the track with the trackless mystery of the marsh. She stared regretfully, and turned away. There was nobody about—neither gentile nor gipsy. The little cottages looked shut and blind. Perhaps everyone was in church. She had better go there herself, and quickly, or it would be too late. The major scale of Northiam bells and the

minor scale of Delmonden, which down here on the marsh had sounded like a lusty song and its sorrowful echo, had both now given place to two solitary notes answering each other from Sussex and Kent. That meant she had only five minutes more. She walked a few steps, and then saw a cottage door open ahead of her. Out came two girls with red and brown faces, and roving black eyes. The gipsies at last!

They stared at her and whispered something to each other, then set out towards the village. She followed them, keeping a few yards behind. They were gyppos for certain, but of course civilised, house-bound, and much less stirring than the gipsies at Marsh Quarter. Tom Body had told her that quite a number of gipsies were settled in cottages round and about these parts. They always owned the cottages they lived in and gave themselves great airs. But Tom said they stole chickens just the same. She wondered if these girls stole chickens. They were on their way to church now, carrying big Bibles under their arms. But that didn't mean they didn't steal chickens, any more than Aunt Eleanor's prayer-book meant that she didn't bully her maids. Oh, dear no! Theresa smiled in a satisfaction of worldly wisdom.

The gipsies came to the end of the track, and then turned towards Delmonden, but to Theresa's disappointment they walked past the church, going briskly up the hill towards the village. After a scarcely no-

ticeable hesitation, she followed them. Where were they going with those big Bibles under their arms? Then suddenly she knew. Why, of course they were going to chapel.

This had not struck her before, because chapel had hitherto been outside her world, and yet without that appeal from beyond-the-horizon which so many things outside her world possessed. Now it occurred to her that chapel was probably much more interesting than church, that odder people went there and odder things happened there. Now was her time to hunt a new experience—to follow these gipsies to whatever mysteries took the place of the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England in their religious scheme. She did not think they were going to Hawkhurst; it was much too late—already the bells were silent both in Sussex and in Kent. They were probably going to Providence, the little old chapel in Delmonden.

It stood in a by-lane, at the end of a row of cottages known as Puddingcake. It had been built a couple of hundred years, before Nonconformist churches developed an ecclesiastical style. In fact it looked very like a barn, weather-boarded in white, with a roof of brownish tiles and a few small casement windows. Outside, one or two old tombstones leaned this way and that between rhododendron bushes. The rhododendrons were in flower, and from their midst on this sunny morning came the hum of bees. The whole

place stewed in the sunshine—old, drowsy, homely, humble, and content.

8

It was not till Theresa was inside, seated on a narrow, backless bench behind the gipsies, that she realised she had entirely wrecked her plan for propitiating Mr. Bennet. He would scarcely regard her attendance at chapel as propitiation. For all the good she'd done, she might just as well have gone for her walk on the marsh. But it was too late now. Her going out so soon after her coming in would make too much clatter in this little empty place. It was very small. When full it would not hold more than about fifty, and this morning it held less than a dozen.

Most of the Nonconformists in Delmonden liked to take the bus into Hawkhurst and attend one of the chapels there—Wesleyan, Baptist, or Congregational. Providence was Calvinistic Methodist, and was served only by a lay evangelist, who came there on alternate Sundays. Only those attended who were old-fashioned enough to think it a sin to travel by bus on the Sabbath day, or who found the Hawkhurst chapels too foreign or too fine.

Theresa felt alarmingly conspicuous. She knew that she was dressed differently from everybody else, that she carried two small books where everybody else carried one large one, with other distressing peculiarities.

But her self-consciousness was soon lost in these new, challenging surroundings. The congregation looked unusual—quite different from the congregation in church, where one might see just one or two odd-looking folk in an ordinary crowd. It consisted, besides herself and the gipsies, of a fantastically ancient man in a greatcoat so long that it was almost a cassock, of a couple of farm-labourers with their wives, who might be gipsies too, if brown faces and queer secret eyes meant anything, of a pale-faced girl with a crutch and a high shoulder, and of a little boy who seemed to be quite alone but greatly at his ease. That was all, and she knew nobody. It was a comfortable change from the familiar, inquisitive, commonplace world of church.

The service was evidently just about to start, for a door behind the pulpit opened and a young man came in. At first, Theresa thought he must be a verger or choir-leader or some such official. But he walked straight into the pulpit, and opening the big Bible there, said in a pleasing country voice:

"Dear brothers and sisters, let us begin by reading God's Word in the eleventh chapter of Luke."

All the Bibles were opened and the places found. The young man looked round him, and then a terrible thing happened. She saw his big, rather stern blue eyes fall on her hands, which were folded in her empty lap. Then he said:

"I see that one of our sisters has no Bible. Will

somebody kindly furnish her with a copy of the Word of God?"

Nine pairs of eyes, all rather strange and different from the eyes she knew, turned and fixed themselves upon her. Then the old, old man rose up and tottered to a shelf, from which he took a black and shining copy of the Word of God, and handed it to her. Theresa would have liked to get up and run out of the chapel. But that was still the course of greater courage, so she sat still, blushing and downcast, frenziedly reading the genealogies of Azrikam, Bocheru, and Shemiah on the page that had opened before her.

After a time she felt better. The reader's voice droned pleasantly through the silence, mending the torn places. She lifted her eyes from the page of Chronicles and watched his face as he read. He was a very young man, younger than she had imagined a preacher could be, with a high, ruddy countenance, freckled like her own, and chestnut hair that was thick like a mat upon his head, and sunbleached, as if he never wore a hat. She wondered who he could be—some farmer's son, perhaps. She knew little or nothing of countryside religion, and no gossip had reached her concerning Providence Chapel and its young evangelist. But she had certainly done well to follow the gipsies up the hill, for her worship today was more pleasant and entertaining than she had ever thought worship could be. She loved listening to the preacher's voice, so drawly and countryfied, so unlike the

booming Oxford voice of Mr. Bennet, just as the rambling, colloquial language of the prayer that followed the Bible-reading was unlike the stiff Tudor language she was used to hearing in church. Also the chapel was full of sunshine, great spills of it on the floor and on the white walls, and through the windows with their clear uncoloured glass she could see the tops of the rhododendron bushes and the blue sky quivering with heat, while through the open door came the hum of the bees to murmur with the overtones of prayer.

After the prayer came a hymn, a strange hymn about rivers and fountains; then more reading from the Word of God, and then the sermon. Hitherto Theresa had not listened much. Her mind had been full of impressions coming and going, while her eyes roved about the chapel, and her ears rang with words. Now she suddenly found herself attending. The preacher's eyes were fixed upon her and they seemed to be sending his words deep into her heart. He spoke of the elect soul, clothed in white, sinless, the bride of the Lamb. "Like a wife following her husband she follows the Lamb wheresoever he goeth. He will not allow her to fall, but she must not look on the ground, even to see where the rough places are. She must look only on him, her bridegroom, so altogether lovely."

His blue eyes seemed to burn as he spoke, and his face was full of a warm, mounting colour. Theresa

had hardly noticed a man's face before, except to observe its oddities; but now she found herself studying this unknown preacher—his eyes, his mouth, his hair, his neck which was milk-white above his low, turned-down collar.

"I expect, dear brothers and sisters, you have often walked in the lanes of a dark night. And maybe you've fallen about a bit, what with the puddles and the ruts, and then all of a sudden the moon's come up all shining and lighting you, and you think it's like as if the Lord was hanging out a lamp from his window to light you home. There's a lamp hanging out from God's window to light our souls home to Him. And when we've come to the door we must knock, as we read in the Word today, 'Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.' Oh, brothers and sisters, who will open the door? Why, him! The Lamb himself! The Bridegroom! He'll say to our poor souls, 'Where have you been walking out there in the night? Come in and put on your white raiment.' Can you imagine the joy of the poor soul to find herself thus welcomed and embraced?"

A faint strange thrill was passing down Theresa's spine, and down her arms from her shoulders to her wrists. She suddenly felt herself trembling and cold, afraid and yet attracted. What was the meaning of this? Was she turning religious—being converted? Oh, how wonderful to be converted in Providence Chapel by a young preacher with solemn blue eyes!

She waited for something more to happen, but nothing did.

The sermon ended. The friendly, husky voice was still, and for a few moments they were all silent, in the sunshine and the drone of the bees. A hymn brought the service to an end with the collection, to which Theresa impiously contributed the half-crown that her aunt had given her to put in the church plate. It caused some stir. She saw the ancient man pointing it out to the preacher when he handed him the alms-dish, and once again she felt conspicuous and embarrassed. Now she hoped she would be able to slip away quietly. But the worst was still to come. She saw the evangelist come down from the pulpit and stand by the door, to greet his little flock as they passed out.

She might have foreseen it, knowing country ways in church. But somehow she had expected chapel to be different in this respect as in others. Well, she must face it. She only hoped he wouldn't be too inquisitive about her, ask her who she was. She slipped behind the gipsies, in front of one of the couples, hoping rather foolishly that he would not notice her. It was strange to feel so shy, to find her heart thumping so hurriedly against her side. . . .

She stood opposite him, and had taken his outstretched hand.

"Good morning," he said simply, "I hope you liked the service."

"Oh, yes, very much, thank you. . . ."

That was all. But once more down her spine and down her arm passed that strange tingling thrill; once more she felt her heart full of a great charge of mystery, of longing and fear. She had had no idea religion was like this.

9

The chapel service had lasted a little longer than the service in church, and Mr. Bennet's congregation had dispersed into its homes, fortunately for Theresa, who came flying down the hill to meet him walking up it, like a shepherd at the tail of his flock.

"Oh! hullo! Good morning. Oh, please tell me—is it St. Mark's day or the Fourth Sunday after Easter?"

Mr. Bennet felt surprised. This was an unusual greeting from his young friend, Miss Silk, and she looked, he thought, a little wilder than usual, waving her Sunday hat in one hand, and her prayer-book in the other, while her hair stood out round her face more than ever like the rays of a mediæval sun.

"It is St. Mark's day. St. Mark being the feast of an Evangelist, takes precedence of——"

"Oh, please don't tell me about that. I want to know—were the Bourners in church? The Bourners of Devenden?"

"I didn't notice. I can't always see who's in the congregation."

"Then I'll say they were. That'll save a fuss. And now—did you give out that notice about the Melanesian Mission?"

"My dear young lady, why this catechism? . . . And weren't you in church yourself?"

"No, I'm sorry to say I wasn't. I started out, but never got there. Oh, do be a sport and tell me about the notice."

"Yes, I gave it out. But what makes you so anxious to know?"

"Because, don't you see? Aunt asked me to find out all these things for her in church, and if I don't know them she'll guess I've never been."

"Are you going to tell her lies about it?"

"I suppose so. There'll be the filthiest row if I don't."

"And you're getting me to aid and abet you in this disgraceful scheme?"

"Please don't be angry. If you lived with Aunt you'd soon find yourself telling lies—bigger and better ones every day. And I really did mean to go to church. I got as far as the gate, but then I met two gipsies coming from Lossenham, and I simply couldn't resist following them to see where they went, and they went to chapel."

"So you went to chapel too?"

"Yes, I did. There, you see I'm telling you the truth."

She had turned round with him, and they were walking together up the hill.

"Oh, don't say I've offended you again," she pleaded.

"Again?"

"Yes, you didn't like what I said yesterday about clergymen, so I swore to myself I'd go to church today just on purpose to make it up to you. Otherwise I'd have taken advantage of Aunt being ill to go off and enjoy myself. Then I met the gipsies, and followed them, and I simply couldn't resist the chance of exploring a new thing."

"And how did you like the new thing?"

"Chapel? I liked it very much indeed, though I felt rather queer, as there were so few people, and everybody looked at me."

"Do you really think they won't tell your aunt where you've been?"

"There wasn't anyone there who knew me."

"They all knew you, you may take my word for it; and the whole village will be talking about it this evening. So all the lies I've promised to help you tell will be wasted."

"Oh, no, they won't. I don't believe anyone would give me away to Aunt Eleanor. They haven't yet."

"Perhaps they wouldn't tell her straight out, but they gossip about you to each other and it might get round that way. Only yesterday Mrs. Boorman was telling Mrs. Bennet you'd been to the Plough and had asked her husband to serve you with a drink."

"And he wouldn't do it, the old swine; but his wife made me go and sit with her in the parlour, and then

they brought it in on a tray and let me taste it, the way you'd let a child taste tea. Next time I'll try the pub at Hawkhurst."

"I hope you'll do nothing of the kind."

Theresa grinned. Then suddenly she thought of something else.

"Tell me, who is the preacher at Providence Chapel?"

"Young George Heasman; he's a son of the Heasmans at Ethnam."

"Why, that's one of Aunt's farms."

"Yes, you're quite right; it is. That's another reason for her hearing all about you. He lives over at Cranbrook, where he's got a job of some sort. I believe he wants to enter the Methodist ministry, but they can't afford just yet to send him to a training college, so he's doing work as a lay preacher for the moment."

"Do you know him?"

"Not very well. His parents are nominally church people, but he left us when he went to Cranbrook."

"Isn't he rather young to be a minister?"

"I think he's about twenty-one, and he isn't a real minister yet."

They had come to the Rectory gate, where their ways divided. Theresa faltered, as if she had more questions to ask, but all she said was:

"You won't give me away to Aunt Eleanor?"

"No, I won't. It'll be on my conscience, but I won't."

"That's decent of you, and I'll do the same for you one day. Good-bye."

She was off, leaving him as usual half regretful for opportunities missed in her company.

10

Mr. Bennet was right. By evening the story of Theresa's visit to Providence Chapel had spread all over the village. But Theresa was right too, and no rumour of it reached her aunt. After all, Goldstrow's intercourse with Delmonden was conducted on lines discouraging to gossip; and though Delmonden disapproved of Miss Silk, it disapproved of her in a friendly, family way, much as it often disapproved of Mr. Bennet, and would never pass on her judgment to one whom it looked upon as beyond the pale of its domesticities.

There was the further safeguard of Mrs. Millington's being in bed with a chill, and on her recovery spending a few days in Bulverhythe, where it was her proud duty to open a Bazaar and visit a missionary exhibition. She had one or two friends of her London days staying at the Queen's Hotel, so it was not till Friday that Delmonden saw her again, and, by then, Sunday's scandal had worn a little pale and thin.

The Rector met her on Saturday morning, at an inopportune moment—inopportune because it called him out of the peace which always descended upon him

after a visit to his old friend Mrs. Iggulsden. Every Saturday morning for the last two years he had taken the Sacrament to her in her cottage at Mount Pleasant, just above the church, where she lived with her son and his wife and their three little children. For those two years she had been almost completely bedridden, and when his ministry was over, he would sit beside her while she drank her cup of tea, and tell her about Delmonden and its business, at one time unconsciously seeking her advice, often now deliberately asking for it, as he had come to learn how rich her old heart was in wisdom.

Today he told her about Theresa Silk.

"I take a special interest in that girl. I don't know why. My wife says it's because we've lost our own daughter; but if Sylvia had lived I don't think she would have grown up at all like Theresa. And she'd have been much older—nearly thirty by now—though I always think of her as a little thing of four."

"Maybe this is a charge laid on you instead of the other."

"Maybe it is, but it's hard to think what I can do about it. I've no control over her, and she'd been mishandled all through the years when good handling is so important."

"You shouldn't fret over such things as control and handling. They döant mean nothing much. Young folks are like the birds, that'll come to you if you've

sugar between your lips, but ull die maybe if you handle them."

"Yes, that's true, and I'm afraid I don't carry sugar as a rule."

"You're sweet enough—your heart's sweet enough towards me, my kind friend. But, of late, I've had a feeling you're growing tired."

"I'm growing old, Mrs. Iggulsden."

"Old! You äun't old at sixty-five."

"I'm old enough to see how little I've done in so much time, and how much I've got to do in so little."

"Surelye, you're gitting old when you talk like that. But it äun't often I hear such words from you. I tell you, you're growing tired wud the burden of this pläace, and maybe when you've had a bit of change in the Fall you'll be as young as your years. Scarce more'n a boy it seems to me, seeing as I'm eighty-three and could be mother to you."

Thus they chatted on, the relations of parson and parishioner lost in a friendship based on deeper things. It had been an irritating reaction to find himself in the street, confronting the woman who was in all points Mrs. Iggulsden's anti-climax.

"Ah, good morning, Mr. Bennet—I've been wanting to speak to you."

For a moment he thought that she had heard about Theresa's visit to Providence, but all she had to complain of was that on entering the church on some

pretext or other that morning she had found a young woman there without a hat.

"The holiday season has begun early, and I suppose she was a tripper from Bulverhythe. I told her either to go out at once or tie her handkerchief over her head. If I were you I'd put up a notice in the porch about it."

Mr. Bennet's face slowly turned a brick red.

"How dare you order people about in my church!" said his heart. His lips, after a struggle, managed to say, "I'm afraid I'm used to hatless heads in church. When I was at Skelborough, in Durham, we couldn't worry about hats, or we shouldn't have had any children at all. I believe it's the same in East London—the children don't wear hats in church or anywhere else."

"This wasn't a child, but an exceedingly impertinent young woman. She seemed to think I was the Rector's wife, judging by the way she spoke. Besides, Delmonden isn't either Durham or East London—and I don't see how you get round St. Paul."

"Delmonden isn't Corinth," Mr. Bennet's inner voice retorted—rather neatly, he thought. "I think St. Paul was writing chiefly for his own times in that matter," he paraphrased aloud.

"Oh! I suppose you're a Modernist. I confess the old faith's good enough for me. But Modernism is very popular just now—especially in high places."

"Yes, I look like a man in favour with high places,"

sneered Mr. Bennet's heart, now nearly bursting with rage. Outwardly he could say nothing at all, but "Good morning," as he turned to go.

"Oh! don't hurry off like that, please. There's something else I want to ask you. The reason I went into church this morning was to see if it was true, as I'd been told in Marlingate, that you keep the Sacrament there."

"I have done so for the last five years."

"Well, I was not aware of it. I know nothing about these things, and you do it in such a hole-and-corner way. . . . I'd no idea of it till my friends, the Leslies, told me. I suppose that means that if I am ill you won't come to celebrate for me at my house."

"It doesn't necessarily mean that at all. And will you please forgive me if I don't go on with this discussion? It is a religious matter which I find it difficult to discuss with—at the street corner."

He could trust himself no further, and taking off his hat, he left her.

II

Afterwards, he wondered if he had done wrong. Perhaps he had spoken too hastily. Ah—that was it; his besetting sin. On too many of those too rare occasions when he found time to take his burdened heart into Bulverhythe and there open his grief to some discreet and learned Minister of God's Word, he found

himself confronted with that besetting sin of hastiness and impatience. It had always been there, even in the North-country days of his youth, when his religious practice was sharper, before he became lost in Paganism or the religion of the villages. The quality of his haste had altered, that was all. It was now altogether more of a tetchy, ratchy affair, an old man's failing, rather than the youthful, potent thing it used to be. It used to be a fine, vigorous full-blooded eagle of a sin, and here it was, after thirty years, moulting and casting its feathers, as ugly as old age itself—No! he mustn't say that. There was Mrs. Iggulsden, whose old age was not ugly. And there was Lucy. . . . He could not really think of her as old—and yet she was as old as he. Only a few months had divided them when they left the altar of St. Oswald's church in Durham. So, since he was old, she must be old—and since she seemed so young, perhaps he wasn't really so old as he felt this morning.

Slightly cheered by this thought, he walked home in search of her, and together they devised schemes for propitiating Mrs. Millington, if so be she needed propitiation.

"We might ask her to tea," suggested Mrs. Bennet, "in fact I really think we ought to, as we have been there twice, and perhaps we should have had her here before this. But I was waiting till we were quite through with the Spring cleaning, as I want the place to look nice for her. Besides, it's rather hard on Poor

Emily if we entertain much while she's working so hard, to say nothing of her sometimes being rather queer when she's tired, so that I could never feel quite sure——"

"My dear, you needn't worry. She doesn't want our hospitality. She would rather have us indebted to her for a few meals. What she wants is to run this parish."

"Well, you'd never let her do that, of course. I don't think people understand. . . . I mean, why, even I daren't put my nose into anything. You remember how often you've told me I have no canonical existence"—trying to make him smile with an old joke—"so of course you can't allow Mrs. Millington . . . we might ask her to open the Parish Garden Party."

"I've as good as asked Mrs. Gilpin."

"That's a pity, for I think Mrs. Millington might expect to be asked, in view of her position. Besides, she has so much more money to spend."

"Well, Goldstrow was empty when I spoke to Mrs. Gilpin about it. I daresay she's forgotten by now. Certainly we'd make more out of Mrs. Millington. She doesn't mind spending her money, especially if she thinks she gets a few souls thrown in as make-weights. We might do worse than ask her. But that won't pacify her much. She's out for bigger game. She wants to control the church and its services."

"What makes you think that?"

"She was talking to me about it this morning. I'm in for a bad time if she starts interfering in that way."

"She can't make you do anything you don't approve of."

"No, but she might write to the Bishop about me."

"You know, dear, he wouldn't take the slightest notice. You don't do anything he doesn't allow, and he hates being bothered."

"Yes, but her letters might bother him more than anything he can do to me. And anyhow it won't help me at all, being complained of by aggrieved parishioners. I've managed to keep everybody happy and quiet so far, and I don't want trouble now."

"There won't be any trouble, I'm sure of it. All you've got to do is to show her some little attention. I'll ask her to tea, and you'll ask her to open the Garden Party, and you'll soon find she'll stop worrying about the services. After all, she's been five months here and never complained."

"And all this for a woman whom, if I hadn't been in my present position, I'd have read out from the altar for what she did to poor Susan Lamb! But I've got to truckle and defer to her because she has money, and I haven't, so I want hers. Really it's disgraceful to see us, Anglican clergy, all over the country selling our immortal souls for money. Why haven't we got any of our own? Why haven't I got as much as those old rascals who built this church and then ran away in a fright and left it? Why can't I keep the dead body of a bishop in a golden shrine and fleece the laity throughout the length and breadth of England to fill

my coffers? Why can't I scare people out of their lives with a mere threat of Purgatory? Bah! I can't even scare 'em with hell. Why, oh why, was there a Reformation?"

"Darling, you know you don't really mean all that."

"Yes, I do. I mean every word of it. But you needn't worry—I shan't say anything outside this house. I'll be as meek as a lamb, as mild as a dove, as creeping and cringing as any worm or parson. You needn't worry, my dear."

II. Mrs. Bennet

I

MRS. BENNET WAS OUT DISTRIBUTING THE "PARISH MAGAZINE." THIS WAS A DUTY SHE TOOK UPON herself once a month, and unless the weather was really atrocious not a single copy ever went through the post. This afternoon seemed a specially good one for the task, as Mr. Bennett was making one of his rare expeditions into Bulverhythe. The besetting sin called for it, and he also felt that he ought to go to see the Lambs and do what he could about poor Susan, who would now be at home, drinking her second, unnecessary cup of disgrace.

Mrs. Bennet on such occasions always made herself busy, so that she might forget the miles between them. It was curious, she thought, how she never could grow used to the idea of Harry's being away from her, even after thirty-five years of married life. She missed him if he left her for so much as a day. A long tramp round the parish would fill her time and occupy her thoughts, and give her, moreover, the satisfaction of having coped with and settled the magazine this month.

Delmonden "Parish Magazine" was bound in a blue cover illustrated with a drawing of Delmonden church,

which old Sir John Fleet had presented to it some years ago. Below was printed a list of any possible human being in any possible connection with the parish—choir men, choir boys, bell-ringers, parochial church councillors, churchwardens, sidesmen, sexton, organist, schoolmaster, schoolmistress, Sunday-school teachers, all who liked to see their names in print and would buy the magazine for the privilege. Inside the cover, Mr. Apps advertised his groceries and Mr. Boorman his ales, and Mr. Tilden announced that he came three afternoons a week to Delmonden for boot repairs. Miss Bell, the organist and schoolmistress (several of the names appeared in more than one capacity), offered music lessons at a shilling for half an hour, and the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes proclaimed that their Christmas Club was open.

Then came the Rector's Notes, a letter from an old Delmondian in Canada, a list of Baptisms (one), Marriages (none), and Deaths (one) for the month, and then the heart and pith, in the shape of an "inset" published by a church society, and providing stories, pictures, poems, recipes, and answers to correspondents. Mrs. Bennet thought it a wonderful two pennyworth, and never failed to read every word of it—"so bright, so interesting, and really of very high quality. I like it better than the expensive magazines you see on the bookstalls." It contained a serial story nearly as Gothic as Delmonden Rectory itself—all about Alice a novice unsure of her vocation. For four months

now—January, February, March, April—she had been unsure, and Mrs. Bennet had guessed that, in May, she would decide to come out into the world. That would leave her seven months to grow sure and go back again. But in May the story had left the convent abruptly, and devoted its instalment of about a thousand words to an entirely new character—a young and zealous curate. Could it be that a bridegroom was awaiting Alice, and that if she came out of the convent she would not have to return? Mrs. Bennet trusted that it was not wrong of her to hope so—and yet she doubted. Some of the readers of "The Parish Sentinel" were strong advocates of clerical celibacy and would not approve of such a union. The June number was therefore fraught with a special interest, and she regretted that there had been no time to read it before she set out.

Indeed, by the time she reached the end of the Rectory lane, this regret had become so poignant that she felt she could not begin her round without at least a glimpse of Alice's fate. It was true that her own copy awaited her return for more leisured enjoyment, but it was quite possible that she would not get back much before Harry, and then he would want to tell her about his doings in Bulverhythe, and the evening would be filled up with chat. She might just as well take a peep now, and satisfy her curiosity. Something admonitory in her system told her that curiosity ought to be mortified rather than satisfied; but dallying with

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temptation nearly always had the effect on Mrs. Bennet of turning desire into obsession. At the corner of Rectory lane and Delmonden hill, she snatched open the top copy of her burden, with the result that all the others fell into the road.

One glimpse of Alice, without her habit and with a suitcase in her hand, saying good-bye to the Mother Superior . . . she'd come out, then . . . "to be continued" . . . "Oh, dear, how wrong of me! I shouldn't have done that, and now, look what a mess! I hope nothing's spoiled. Oh, dear, oh, dear, the wind's blowing them away! What shall I do?—Oh, thank you, my dear, thank you, thank you. How good you are!"

Theresa Silk had jumped off her bicycle, on a road sky-blue with Delmonden Magazine. She propped her machine against the hedge and started picking up the litter, laughing boisterously the while. It did not take long. Soon all the copies were retrieved, not much the worse.

"Whatever made you do that?" mocked Miss Silk.

"I wanted to take a dip into just one of them . . . it was silly of me, I know. I'm so grateful to you, dear, for picking them up. I don't know what I should have done if you hadn't come when you did, for the wind was beginning to blow them away."

"Lucky I passed, then. I say, do you happen to know if there's a wedding round hereabouts today? a gipsy wedding?"

"There's none in Delmonden, I know for sure. Mr. Bennet's gone into Bulverhythe for the afternoon."

"I wonder where it can be, then. I'm nearly sure they said this Wednesday. It was those gipsies, you know, that I followed to chapel. On the way back I heard them talking, and they said Aunt Slippery Jane or somebody was going to be married. I do want to see a gipsy wedding."

"They don't always get married in church, I'm afraid, and if they do, it's just like any other wedding. I shouldn't go looking for them, if I were you, dear. You might have a Disagreeable Experience."

She gazed anxiously at Theresa. Really it was bad to see the child tearing about the country like this. If Mrs. Millington would only look after her, half as well as she looked after other people's business . . .

"Now, it would be really kind if you would come round with me and help me carry all these magazines. Then I shan't drop them again."

"Where on earth are you taking them?"

"Oh, round the parish. I've a lot of houses to go to in the village—just handing them in, you know, and saying a few bright words. Then I'll have to go out with them as far as Reedbed, Wassall, Ethnam, and some other farms."

Theresa hesitated. She was not given to good deeds, and would not out of kindness to Mrs. Bennet have abandoned her expedition, but she had caught the name of Ethnam, and remembered it was there, so the

Rector had told her, that the parents of the Providence preacher lived. She would like to see them; possibly she might see him too—just possibly. It seemed worth while to forego her hunt of the shadow of Aunt Slippery Jane, in order that she might enjoy the substance of the Heasman family.

"Very well, then," she said, "I'll come. Give me the magazines, and I'll push 'em along on the bike."

2

Mrs. Bennet's parochial visitation was not so terrible as she had made it sound. Her "bright words" resolved themselves in practice into a few humble enquiries as to her parishioners' welfare. She had by this time thoroughly learned her job as Parson's wife, though she imagined that she performed it with more of an air than was actually the case. She knew who was ill, and who was convalescent, and who was always in good heart, praise the Lord! She knew who had young children at school or leaving school or just going to school. She knew who had relations in Canada or Australia or London or Bulverhythe. She knew all this, and she was pleased to know it, without showing any special curiosity to know more. She humbly sought to please, and the parish appreciated her endeavour. Here was no fine lady condescending—on the contrary, she sometimes made them condescend, which was a pleasant and rare experience. She allowed

them the luxury of occasionally feeling sorry for her—living in that great big house with only little more money than they lived on in their cottages, losing her baby girl years ago with diphtheria, and never having another to take her place, poor woman. . . . There were few villages so well placed in regard to their Parson's wife. . . .

Towards the end of the road this attitude began to express itself in the offer of cups of tea.

"The kettle's just on the boil, Ma'am." "A good cup of tea 'ud put some heart into you, Mrs. Bennet." "You look tired, my dear."

Thus, in various keys of friendship, Mrs. Gasson, Mrs. Sayer, and Mrs. Godfrey pressed her, but Mrs. Bennet could not wait. She knew that the farms would force tea upon her. She would have to sit down to table either at Reedbed or at Ethnam, and she had no time to spare for the village too.

"The people are all so kind," she said to Theresa, when at last they left Delmonden behind them. "Whenever I go out with the magazine, I always say to Emily: 'Now, don't lay tea for me, for I'm sure to be given it somewhere. Make your own tea at five o'clock, but don't lay it for me.' I have to tell her everything exactly like that, you know, or she'd do something foolish. She'd boil the kettle and make the tea and cut the bread and butter for Mr. Bennet and me, even if we had gone away for the afternoon. Such a waste! But, poor thing, we really mustn't blame her.

She's most hard-working and devoted. In fact her mistakes always make more trouble for her than for us."

"Where are we going now?" asked Theresa.

"I thought either Ethnam or Reedbed next—it depends on where you'd like to have tea. They'll both want to give us tea, and it doesn't make much difference which we go to first."

"I'd like to have tea at Ethnam."

"Very well, we'll go there, then. Mr. Vidler of Reedbed is Mr. Bennet's churchwarden—perhaps he'd think we ought to have tea with them, as the Heasmans aren't at all good church people . . . but I don't see that he can really mind much . . . it'll seem quite natural for us to have had tea at Ethnam if we get there about five o'clock, as I expect we shall if we go now. . . . Anyhow, it might do more good if we had tea with the Heasmans—I mean they might feel encouraged to go to church. They used to come quite a lot once, but having their son a Nonconformist preacher has naturally changed them a bit. In fact I think they'd probably turn Nonconformist too if it wasn't for fear of offending Mrs. Millington. She's rather a dragon about some things, you know—Oh, I beg pardon, my dear. I forgot she was your aunt."

"That doesn't matter. I know what Aunt's like."

"Well, Ethnam's her property, and of course she has a right to do as she pleases. Also, I don't think poor Heasman's a very good farmer—some of his fields look

dreadful. . . . His lease expires at the end of next year, and if he went to chapel it's more than likely she wouldn't let him renew it. It's hard for them, though, never being able to hear their son preach. . . . I'm told he's quite a good preacher. Oh, by the way, I suppose you've heard him."

"Yes, he was preaching at Providence Chapel when I went there."

"I don't think *you* ought to have gone there"—Mrs. Bennet remembered herself suddenly as a clergyman's wife—"you have no special call to be interested, like the poor Heasmans. But I must say that if I went to chapel—as I never would, of course, for I love the Church, and Bishop Wilkinson himself prepared me for Confirmation, when he was at St. Peter's, Eaton Square; but if I could ever picture myself going to chapel, which of course I couldn't, I'd rather go to Providence, than to any of the chapels in Hawkhurst, which attract people so much, I'm afraid, now that the buses run on Sundays. Quite a lot of our people go, you know, in the evenings; but before the buses were put on they used to go to church, as Providence Chapel was always considered rather low class."

"George Heasman works in Cranbrook, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he's head salesman at the United Tea Stores. I've seen him looking very smart in his white coat. He wants, of course, to be a real minister, poor lad, but they can't afford the training. Meanwhile he comes here as lay Evangelist on alternate Sundays—the other

Sundays I believe he goes to Iden Green. By the way, Wednesday's early closing day at Cranbrook, so we may see him at Ethnam this afternoon."

3

They arrived at the farm in a spate of chatter—Mrs. Bennet's chatter, for Theresa had scarcely uttered a word since she had heard there was such a good chance of meeting George Heasman. Her heart was troubled; she did not know whether she wanted to meet him or not. She had wanted to see what his parents and his home were like, but for some strange reason she was not quite sure if she wanted to see him himself. Something in her was afraid—afraid and yet wanting what she was afraid of. Why did she feel like this? What nonsense it all was! She began to wish she had not come.

Ethnam was rather a poor little farm, settled in a fold of the Goldstrow estate, and staring away through its small, white-rimmed windows towards the hills of Kent. Mrs. Heasman opened the door, revealing a low-roofed kitchen where tea was in progress. The room seemed crowded indefinitely, for the smoke of the woods fire hung under the rafters, blurring the figures of the men who sat around the table. Theresa stared at them anxiously, searching among them, but it was impossible to see what she wanted in the vague mass of heads and shoulders standing out of the smoke,

all patched by the light of the tiny window, which seemed to fall on nothing squarely but the white tablecloth over which everybody was hunched.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Heasman. I've called with the magazine. I do hope it's not an awkward moment, but——"

"Delighted to see you, I'm sure, Mrs. Bennet, and you're just in time for a cup of tea."

Mrs. Heasman came from the Shires, and her voice was prettier than most voices round Delmonden.

"That's very kind—very kind indeed of you. But there are two of us, you know. Miss Silk has been helping me this afternoon."

"Certainly, Ma'am. Come in, both of you. Master, George, here's Mrs. Bennet honouring us for a cup of tea."

They stepped down into the kitchen, which was below the level of the door. Two figures had disentangled themselves from the group round the table—the Master, a small delicate-looking fellow with sandy hair, and George, big and bent under the rafters.

Mrs. Bennet shook hands with both of them, and Theresa did the same. As she took George's hand, she saw his solemn blue eyes recognising her in some perplexity.

"Yes, we've met before. I was at your chapel the Sunday before last."

It was awkwardly spoken, and he seemed at a loss for an answer. Mrs. Heasman filled the pause.

"Yes, George was telling us a stranger—a young lady—had been to Providence. And I must say from what he told me, I guessed it was Miss Silk. But I couldn't be sure."

"I went because the gipsies came," said Theresa. "I followed them in. Do they come every Sunday?"

"No, not every Sunday—very seldom, in fact."

"Do you know their names?"

"Yes; they are Rosa and Medina Criol—and they're not real gipsies, you know, or they wouldn't live in a house."

"Oh, no—I know that, of course. Tom Body told me—and is it true that they haven't real gipsy names, but are named after places? Is Criol a place?"

"There's a Criol Farm over by Shadowhurst."

During this conversation they had taken their seats at the tea-table among the farm men. Owing to some mismanagement, a big labourer sat stooping over his lifted saucerful of tea between Theresa and Mrs. Bennet. She and George were separated from the others, shut in among the farm men, islanded in their own queer little conversation, away from the polite platitudes that were passing between Mrs. Bennet and her hosts. George's voice was not like his mother's, the voice of the Shires, but the voice of Kent, rough, drawling, inarticulated—though he was obviously trying to do his best with it, realising no doubt its unfitness to be a minister's. Theresa liked it better than any voice she had heard, and as she listened to it, drawling on

about the gipsies and their ways, she suddenly felt again that thrill which had passed quickening through her in Providence Chapel two Sundays ago.

This time she knew that it could have nothing to do with religion. It was not religion that made her heart suddenly miss a beat, her eyes fill, and her thoughts fail. It was some queer secret call that passed from him to her, making her almost wish that he would rise up and go away out of the room, out of the house, so that she could follow him. What did it mean?—that she had fallen in love? She felt frightened—and unwilling. It was all nonsense; she couldn't have fallen in love with a man whom she scarcely knew. Why, she'd seen him only twice, spoken to him only once—and she'd never cared about men. Angrily she buried her thoughts in the conversation. Did he know the gipsies at Marsh Quarter?

"No; I don't have much truck with gipsies nor they with me. But sometimes I've wondered if there mightn't be a call to labour among them."

"I don't expect they labour much, do they?"

"I mean a call to take them the Word."

She remembered with a little shock that he was a preacher.

"Yes," he continued; "sometimes I feel I'm wasting my time calling the righteous to repentance. I should ought to go among sinners—gipsies, mumpers, and such. I feel it would be fine to go from village to

village, preaching on the greens instead of in half-empty chapels . . ."

"Yes, it would be fine." She suddenly saw the preaching of the Gospel as an adventure, instead of, as she had always thought it, the dullest of dull things.

"But I can't do it. I must go where I'm sent, for I hope to get my training as a minister some day. My dad and mam can't afford to pay for me, so I'm working hard to earn the money."

"Mrs. Bennet told me you work at Cranbrook."

"Yes, I've a job with the United Tea Company—quite a good job, and I hope that in five or six years' time . . ."

"Are you going to Cranbrook Fair?"

The sudden turn in the conversation took him by surprise, and made him stammer.

"N-n-no. I don't go to fairs."

"I want to go to this one, and see Rita. Have you heard about Rita? No arms, no legs, no head, only a body. It's all done with mirrors, of course. Ethel and Sid Gasson were telling me about her. She was on show at Rye, but I couldn't get over. I'll go to Cranbrook if I die for it."

"It's queer to think of a young lady like you going to fairs. They're rough places."

"That's why I love them—they're exciting and odd. Don't you sometimes want to do things that are exciting and odd?"

"No," he said, priggishly; then suddenly caught her eye and said "Yes," with a shamefaced air.

"You do."

"I do when I'm not feeling serious-minded."

Theresa stared at him in some surprise. Then the words suddenly rushed past her:

"Come to Cranbrook Fair."

"I'll be busy at my work."

Her face fell, then she remembered:

"It's on a Wednesday."

Young Heasman began to wonder why she so much wanted his company. Her eagerness flattered him, and he felt that, after all, his speech and manners must be nearer ministerial standards than he had thought in his first humility. Then he remembered that Miss Silk was considered in Delmonden as "no particular class." She was the niece of Delmonden's Great Lady, but rumour told strange tales about her father. Mrs. Millington's only sister had made a runaway marriage with some groom—footman—ploughboy—tinker (rumour was not very sure nor particularly concerned)—and everybody said that the daughter took after her father. He did not quite approve of, nor quite trust, this queer, unladylike young lady, with her rather pushful friendliness. But when he looked into her warm, glowing face, something in himself began to glow, and he could not help thinking that it would be rather a fine thing to go to a fair with this gay crea-

ture. After all, there was always a lot of harmless fun and interest at a fair. One could keep away from any rowdiness or drinking . . . and if he was going to be a minister, it mightn't be so bad for him to know a Great Lady's niece. . . .

By the time the chairs were all pushed back from table, George Heasman and Theresa Silk had made their tryst for Cranbrook Fair.

4

Mrs. Bennet hoped she had not done wrong. Perhaps it had not been wise to leave Theresa behind at Ethnam when she went on to Reedbed. But the girl had been so anxious to see the farm, and George Heasman had been so willing to show it to her, and she could be home in ten minutes on her bicycle. . . . Yet perhaps it had not been wise. Theresa seemed to have made friends almost too quickly with young George. It was no doubt part of her undesirable faculty for getting on with the village boys. She seemed to like boys better than girls, and yet there was no suggestion of the flirt or the baggage about her. In that respect she was younger than her age—ignorant and simple-minded as a child. Though how long that ignorance and simplicity would survive her strange tastes and associations it was difficult to say. However, George was a serious, steady youth, quite different from some

of the others. Nevertheless, Mrs. Bennet did not, as she expressed it, "quite like the look of him"—why, she could not say, though dim surmises troubled her and intuition gave her some unaccountable certainties.

However, the Summer passing with its train soon put the episode out of her mind. There were all the usual Summer activities to crowd her, and there were in addition certain surprises. One of them was the death of the Bishop of Maidstone towards the end of June. It was quite sudden, and disturbed Mr. Bennet considerably. The Bishop had had the supreme, if negative, merit of letting his clergy alone, and the Rector's experience in a northern diocese had rooted in him the conviction that if Bishops do not neglect their clergy they persecute them. In vain Mrs. Bennet tried to paint in glowing colours the portrait of a father in God. Her husband would have none of it.

Just as there are clergy in the Church of England for whom the Bishop can do no wrong, so there are others for whom he can do no right. Mr. Bennet belonged to the latter group. By temperament and training he was an Episcophobiac. At his theological college, his Bishop had stood as a sort of schoolmaster-deity, armed with the power of the keys, to lock the ministerial door on those candidates who did not satisfy the vain curiosities of his examining chaplain. Afterwards, in his first curacy, the Bishop became a sort of disciplinary bugbear, a devourer of deacons. Then had come

his appointment to the Rectory of Skelborough in County Durham, and for ten years—till, at the death of his daughter, and after his wife's subsequent breakdown, he had fled to urbaner aspects of weather and religion—he had fought his Bishop for what were to him bare necessities of faith. He, the shepherd, had fought his chief pastor and overseer under the monstrous aspect of a wolf devouring the flock, and his mind had never quite recovered its balance afterwards.

All had been peace in the diocese of Maidstone. Northern battlefields became friendly, cultivated ground in the sunshine of the London, Brighton, and South Coast religion. The Bishop who died that June had been in the diocese nearly as long as Mr. Bennet, and had visited Delmonden church exactly once. He was of scholarly rather than pastoral temperament, and devoted his energies to compiling enormous commentaries on conservative lines, which the press, to his intense annoyance, always hailed as the last word in revolutionary modernism, on the strength of some careful doubt of Bishop Ussher's chronology, Jonah's whale, or Balaam's ass.

His death revived to the full Mr. Bennet's anti-episcopal complex. He was convinced that his successor would rush ravening over Delmonden after the manner of the northern wolf. He could not believe it when he was told that the old frenzy had passed from the episcopate and that a zealous Evangelical would be

far better for the diocese than an indifferent High Churchman. Many of the clergy in southwest Kent had more ritualistic services than Mr. Bennet, and they all said it was a good thing the old man had died.

"You wait and see what happens," said the Rector of Delmonden to the Rectors of Witsunden and Trillinghurst, "you're too young to remember the old times in the north."

"That's all finished and done with, thank heaven. Why, think of the Bishops who preached at the Jubilee of All Saints, Middlesborough."

"Oh, they'll sail with the wind, right enough."

"Well, the wind in these parts blows strong from Brighton and the South Coast. If the Bishop's a time-server it'll be all the better for us."

Thus they trifled with the first and last things of an older generation. Mr. Bennet was shocked at them, and thought them frivolous, and they thought him a fire-eating old die-hard, who lived on trouble.

Witsunden said, when he was gone:

"If any of these old chaps found themselves living on good terms with their diocesans they'd think they were living in sin."

"And it isn't as if he was at all extreme," replied Trillinghurst; "I believe he still has a sung Matins every other Sunday."

"Does he? Then what on earth does he expect the Bishop to bite him for?"

"Oh, simply because he's been brought up to think

that all Bishops bite; it's a tradition that's almost of faith with his generation."

5

Fortunately, there were many other things happening at this time, to distract Mr. Bennet's thoughts from Maidstone's empty see. Delmonden's annual festival, the Parish Garden Party, was drawing near, sucking up all the days into its vortex. And further, the time was approaching for the Bennets' holiday, and events must be set in train for it. They nearly always took their holiday late in September, because "the country's so pleasant in Summer—it seems a pity to go away," and Autumn meant lower prices in Brighton which for years had been the limit of their venture. At one time it had been the Rector's custom to "exchange" with some town parson, and visit, half-bound, half-free, some more distant coast resort or inland watering place; but that arrangement had often meant an increase rather than a reduction of work and responsibility, and of late years he had felt unequal to its demands. Better go away for a fortnight's real rest and freedom than spend six weeks under another man's burden. Besides, town parsons upset his people . . . he had once come back to a village brooding resentfully over a sermon on Indulgences, while another time he had found his parishioners elated yet doubtful at the good news that "there is no sin." Now, when he

was away, he always had the same quiet, safe old scholar out of Bulverhythe, who would keep the engine of Delmonden's parish life ticking gently for a guinea a week and the use of the Rectory. Dr. Kemp's one drawback was that he seldom preached for less than forty minutes—but that was an advantage in its way, as Mr. Bennet could always feel sure of his welcome home.

As the weeks went by, the Summer visitors began to arrive, not in any great numbers—just a thin scatter of strangers in the village and at the farms. For the most part they were people from Bulverhythe, who could not afford to go very far for their annual change. The Bennets knew most of them, and a tea party at the Rectory was part of the entertainment that Delmonden provided for each one. There were the two old ladies, known to the ribald as Oreb and Zeb, who came every year to rooms at Kitchenhour. They looked exactly like each other, but their relationship was reported to be that of mistress and maid, though which was the mistress and which the maid, no one had ever been able to find out. There were also the Sweets, an elderly clergyman and his wife, both half mad and existing somehow on a pension of twelve shillings a week. They came to all the services at Delmonden church, where the chatter and squeak of their private devotions made their presence more distressing than edifying. There were also one or two pleasant young men on the serving-staff at St. Saviour's,

Bulverhythe, who made terrific inroads on the cold beef at Sunday supper, also a sprinkling of clerks and shop girls, and one or two mysterious couples, holidaying platonically together after the outrageous manner of the times.

Luckily neither Mrs. Bennet nor Poor Emily resented so many intrusions on their privacy and leisure. Indeed Emily took a real delight in so much company —a delight perhaps surprising in a maid-of-all-work who had charge of three Gothic sitting-rooms and eleven Gothic bedrooms.

"I'm fond of company, but I reckon things are often a bit slow down here. There's always company in heaven. It says in church: 'Therefore wud angels and archangels and all the company of heaven .' . . . Maybe the Lord ull let me wait on 'em there, when he sits down to supper wud all his holy ones."

6

Shortly before the Garden Party, Mrs. Bennet was forcibly recalled to her anxieties on behalf of Theresa Silk. At the beginning of August, she became aware that there was gossip in the village about her and young George Heasman. Delmonden gossip was seldom entirely without foundation, and in this case was more circumstantial than usual. Mr. and Mrs. Boorman, Mrs. Apps, and Mrs. Breeds had, each one separately, seen them together at Cranbrook Fair—"riding

on the roundabouts"—"having tea in a tent"—"talking to the gipsies." These indulgences seemed to be considered as odd for young George as for his companion —"a serious sort of chap he'd always be—you'd never catch him enjoying himself anywheres." Then they were seen at Tenterden Fair—then walking together in the lanes over by Udiam—then Sam Tuppeny, carter at Hobby Hobb's farm, had met them on their bicycles as far away as Ebony. Last and worst of all, Mrs. Swaffer of Moon's Green had come upon them kissing.

"I don't believe it!—I don't believe it!" cried Mrs. Bennet, indignantly, to her husband. "Why, she's the last girl in the world, and he's the last boy, to do such a thing."

"I don't believe it either," said Mr. Bennet. "Did Mrs. Swaffer say she actually saw them herself?"

"Yes, behind a haystack at the edge of their two-acre field. She'd gone out after a hen that was laying abroad, and she was searching round under the stacks when she turned a corner and came upon them—they didn't see her."

"I wonder if she saw them—it might have been anybody. How close was she? What time of day was it? Did she tell you this herself?"

"No, she didn't. Miss Bell told me."

"Then I should take no notice—it's not good enough."

"You don't think I ought to ask Mrs. Swaffer about it?"

"No—it's simply encouraging all this darned bubble and scandal that goes on in this place the whole year round. If you get a chance of dropping a hint to the girl herself, that's another matter. She probably has been reckless, though I don't believe in the kissing."

"I never seem to see her at all these days. We're so busy entertaining . . . and she never comes to the house the way she used to."

"She'll come to the Garden Party, won't she? That's only a week ahead, and you might get a chance of speaking to her then."

"I'll make one, anyhow. . . . Yes, perhaps that would be the best thing to do."

7

It had been a happy inspiration of Mrs. Bennet's to ask Mrs. Millington to open the Garden Party. Her response had been warm and immediate, and Mrs. Gilpin's disappointment (if any) had been nobly concealed. Indeed, about a week before the festival, which always took place on the last Wednesday in August, the Great Lady of Goldstrow wrote offering the loan of a trestle-table, two dozen chairs, tablecloths, glass, china, and plate in any quantities.

It seemed almost too good to be true. Mrs. Bennet was used to cadging these necessities in small amounts from several small houses, and hiring the rest. Now money, time, trouble, and temper would all be saved.

She only hoped there would be no breakages. . . . It really was too good of Mrs. Millington, and only showed how right she'd been when she'd told Harry to put up with her tiresome ways for the sake of what he could get out of her. . . . That sounded mercenary. But you simply had to be mercenary if you were a clergyman's wife—always in need of money, always in need of workers. It was worth while swallowing one's proper pride occasionally—not one's principles, of course. . . . She had never meant Harry to do that . . . but just a few mouthfuls of humble pie.

She wrote her benefactor such a letter as made her see herself finally established as Lady Bountiful in her own right, with the result that she did not ask the Bennets to fetch the things as she had first intended, but graciously dispatched them in one of her own carts and with her own man to unpack them, thus saving more money, time, trouble, and temper.

On Tuesday afternoon two big tents were put up on the Rectory lawn—one for refreshments, the other for the exhibition of vegetables and livestock. There would also be a few stalls with goods for sale, a band, and an "al fresco entertainment," with dancing to follow after dusk, when the garden was lit up with Chinese lanterns. But these could not be arranged till the morning of the feast, as one could never feel sure of the weather, and a shower in the night would ruin everything. Also early one morning, some years ago, the Bennets had awakened to see stalls, decorations,

chairs, and stands all flying and scattering over the lawn to the tune of the gambols of a herd of bullocks that had somehow broken in from the Glebe field; while, on the edge of the wreck, Poor Emily ran frantically to and fro shouting, "Stop it, you naughty boys!—Stop it, you naughty boys!"—and then, at the sight of her mistress's horrified face, "Don't worry, Ma'am—don't heed them. They're only boys dressed up in bullocks' clothes."

To Mr. Bennet, the effect of every Parish Party was much the same as if his lawn had been trampled by a herd of bullocks. But each Summer he bravely faced the ordeal and its consequences. The party was the climax of Delmonden's social year, and though the advance of culture into the villages had somewhat dimmed its brilliance with comparisons, the parish supported it enthusiastically, and attended it without distinctions of rank or creed.

Every year, though, the Rector was aware of growing anxiety in its preparation, and growing criticism in its enjoyment. It had all been easy enough twenty years ago, when nothing was wanted but facilities for eating and drinking and the display of garden produce. Now, with buses running to and fro regularly from Bulverhythe with its cinemas, theatre, winter-garden and Palace Pier, the neighbourhood was far more experienced in pleasure and demanded more kick in its entertainments. So the stalls were set up, to introduce the thrills of commerce, and sold household goods,

children's clothes, and a certain amount of food-stuffs, while the concert consisted no longer of the unaided efforts of the Delmonden Brass Band, but involved one or two "turns" by celebrities from Cranbrook, Goudhurst, Bethersden, and other places, who had to be fetched and returned in borrowed cars, while the ladies of the Tenterden Amateur Dramatic Club performed a playlet which involved the setting aside of a room in the Rectory for their dressing and making-up. Mr. Bennet foresaw a time when it might be well to remove the whole performance to Goldstrow, and wondered how much self-respect it would cost him to obtain this boon.

8

This year, the great day dawned perversely with rain slanting from a big wedge-shaped cloud that hung over the marshes. But just as Mrs. Bennet had almost made up her distracted mind, rent between ideals of the "al fresco" and practical realities of health and comfort, the big wedge-shaped cloud moved off solemnly like a ship sailing the yellow heavens of dawn, which, at its sailing, deepened safely into blue, and received from behind Marsh Quarter a sun without any crimson threats for the day.

When at last the afternoon had come—and it seemed several months before it did—that sun was still shining safely and brightly, and up Delmonden hill from the

village, and down it from the northern boundaries of the parish, and along the Rectory lane from outlying parts in the east, came men, women, and children of all kinds and creeds. There were farmers and their families, and farm labourers, from Reedbed, Wassall, Udiam, Devenden, Kitchenhour—cottagers from Lossenham and Four Throws—and the aristocracy of Delmonden, such as the Cheesmans from the new house by Knelle Wood, the Ingpens who had taken over Morghew and made such a mess of it, Dr. and Mrs. Gilpin, the Stones, the Pratts, and others. Then, of course, there were the villagers, and the holiday-makers, and a few pilgrims from other parishes, Rolvenden, Bethersden, Tenterden, and the Isle of Oxney. . . . So altogether there was a great concourse upon the roads and soon a great crowd upon the Rectory lawn.

Mrs. Millington arrived punctually and in a good humour, and Theresa came with her, looking unexpectedly civilised and feminine in a gown of demure, pale blue muslin, like the sky. Mrs. Bennet was astonished at the change in her. She looked almost beautiful with the golden rays of her hair flying out from under her hat, which dimmed her face with its blue shadow till red and brown were almost pink and white. Her manner, too, had subtly changed, honeyed and softened. . . . Mrs. Bennet suddenly grew alarmed —this was just the sort of change you would expect a young man to make. She remembered how she, her-

self, had been accounted something of a tomboy before she met Harry . . . "and then I went straight out and bought a veil and a pair of gloves. Oh, I must make a point of speaking to Theresa some time today."

It was difficult, however, to have a private conversation with anyone, however necessary. And Theresa was especially elusive—she seemed to be always in the distance, always hovering at the edge of some far-off group, lounging in the shadow of some tent or stall between which and the Rector's wife surged a flood of acquaintances, clamouring and greeting. She hung about almost as if she were waiting for some one . . . and then Mrs. Bennet's worst fear was confirmed. George Heasman arrived. There was, on the face of it, nothing extraordinary or outrageous in his coming, for he came with his parents, and there were no distinctions of creed at the Garden Party. But the fact remained that he had never come before, for he was inclined to believe that the Rector looked down on him, and to avoid him in consequence. It was a bad sign that he should be here today. . . . "I must speak to her," said Mrs. Bennet—"give her a word of warning, now, when I've got the chance." She could see Theresa in the distance, looking on in a bored way at a game of clock golf which raged between Miss Bell and Mr. Spragge the sexton. But no sooner had she started to walk in her direction than an indignant Mrs. Apps straddled across the way.

"Please, Ma'am, there's that old lady been picking your flowers."

"Which old lady?"

"Her, over there; the old Parson's wife"—and she indicated Mrs. Sweet, who stood with her husband a few yards off, clutching a bunch of larkspur and lupin in a guilty, conscious way, like a child that has been found out and fears that it will be deprived of its treasure.

"I told her straight, I did, as it was trespassing," continued the indignant Mrs. Apps, "and a great abuse of your kindness, Ma'am, I says."

"Well, never mind; I won't say anything to her now —not unless she does it again. After all, it's only a few flowers, and she's very poor—not quite right in her head, if the truth were known."

"There's too many not quite right in their heads around here," complained Mrs. Apps, "it comes hard on them what are and have got to behave themselves."

"I can't speak to her now, anyway. I want to find Miss Silk."

But Miss Silk had vanished. The trees of the garden had received her and hidden her from view. Somewhere in Delmonden's glebe she wandered, but Mrs. Bennet could go no further in her pursuit. The Entertainment was beginning, and she must be at her post.

She did not see Theresa again till tea-time, and then she was having tea with her aunt, and nothing could

be said. Mrs. Millington still approved of her surroundings—"A very successful afternoon we're having, Mrs. Bennet. That was an excellent entertainment those Tenterden ladies gave us, though I don't approve of a girl playing a man's part. If she does, she should play it in women's clothes; but there are so many plays written nowadays for women only that it really isn't necessary to have men's parts at all."

"I hope you approve of the tea arrangements?"

"Oh, yes, I think you've managed excellently. These cakes were made by my cook, were they not?—Ah, yes, I thought I recognised them. I said to Theresa, 'We shall be safe if we take these.' How do you think the child's looking, Mrs. Bennet?"

"I think she's looking lovely." Mrs. Bennet beamed on Theresa's looks in spite of her distrust of their causes.

"I'm going to leave her here when I go back after tea. She says she'd like to stay for the dancing. I'll come and fetch her about nine o'clock, as I'd like to see some of the dancing myself. You'll look after her, won't you?"

"Oh, indeed I will."

But, as before, Theresa did not give her a chance. She was always elusive and often invisible. It almost seemed as if she were fleeing Mrs. Bennet. At first there was a certain comfort in the thought that George Heasman had left. His parents had gone home, and she had not seen him about since tea-time. Then

suddenly, when the dancing had begun, she caught sight of him and Theresa at the edge of the crowd of onlookers. It was dusk, and the new-lit lanterns made the light still more uncertain, but they seemed to be talking earnestly. She went over to them, resolved on their separation. George, she knew, would not dance—he thought it wrong—but she would find a partner for Theresa. Her eye lit on young Trevor Ingpen, newly home from Siam, and, gathering him on her way, she brought him before the young couple who were blind to all except each other.

"Theresa, my dear. You must dance. Let me introduce you to Mr. Trevor Ingpen."

"I really don't want to dance, thank you, Mrs. Bennet."

"My dear, please do. We *all* do. I'm going to."

Theresa glanced at George. Her eager bright eyes seemed to say, "There now!"

He shook his head.

"I'm not trained for dancing," he said sulkily.

Theresa tossed her head and gave her hand to Trevor Ingpen. Mrs. Bennet's point was won, and she felt almost sorry for the disconsolate George.

"Won't you let me find you a partner?" she beamed. "I know so many nice girls."

He turned from her almost rudely.

"No nice girl would dance like this, hugged in a man's arms. It's the beginning of evil."

Mrs. Bennet walked away.

"What a terrible young man!" she thought to herself. "I really can't understand Theresa. I wonder . . . I really wonder if she's—well—quite like other people."

It struck her that there was a curious simplicity about Theresa. She was different from other girls of her own class, even from girls of a class not her own. Mrs. Bennet felt suddenly painfully alarmed for her.

"O Lord," she prayed, with the echo of George Heasman's last word in her ears, "O Lord, deliver her from evil."

9

As the evening passed, Mrs. Bennet grew more lighthearted. She saw Theresa dancing again with young Ingpen, and the sight encouraged her. Also, she was dancing herself. She always danced at the Party, once at least with Mr. Boorman, and once with each of the Churchwardens, Dr. Gilpin and Dr. Vidler of Reedbed. She knew that she was growing too old for it, but she had done it for twenty-five years, and enjoyed it in spite of scanty breath.

It was a lovely evening, fresh and warm. She was glad she had put on her blue silk—she seldom had a chance of wearing it, and it was so pretty, she thought, with its fall of lace. It would do for at least another two years, and then she would get something black—though of course there was no harm in wearing pretty

colours . . . she had always stood out for that . . . but she was getting old . . . and perhaps black was more becoming . . . though not economical . . . black was not . . . economical wear . . . in the country . . . and a nice brown, perhaps . . . a nice . . . Whoosh!

The last of Mrs. Bennet's breath, which for a turn or two had been breaking up her thoughts with gasps, rushed out of her body as a pair of huge shoulders crashed into her and laid her flat upon her partner's bosom.

"Hi!" yelled Mr. Boorman, "take care where you're going, young chap. It's that Heasman lad," he added, as he led the Rector's wife out of the crush; "he's never danced before in his life, and he can't do it now."

"Why . . . he told me . . . he didn't want to dance. . . . I offered . . . him a partner."

"He's dancing with Miss Silk."

"Miss Silk!"

"Yes, I reckon he didn't like her dancing so much with young Mr. Ingpen."

Mrs. Bennet was speechless. Her eyes searched the mass of the dancers, as it swayed, jigging to the strains of some negroid rhythm that had come to Delmonden from Tennessee. The last of the dusk was gone, and it was now quite dark. The Chinese lanterns that for a time had hung round the lawn like dim, delicious fruit were now so many moons under the trees. They cast only a freakish light upon the dancers, and she

found it hard to distinguish anybody. She thought she saw Theresa's big hat, but when it came nearer it was only Ethel Gasson's big hat. . . . Oh dear, what had become of her? She must be somewhere in that mass—feet shuffling and sliding, shoulders jerking, arms embracing . . . "hugged in a man's arms" . . . that was what that dreadful young fellow had said. And now he was hugging Theresa, hugging her and bumping her about. . . . With a sigh Mrs. Bennet turned away from the chiaroscuro of the lawn, into the light of the many moons that hung under the trees.

Here she found her husband, looking for her.

"My dear, Mrs. Millington's come back."

"Oh, has she? I'm so glad."

This did not sound quite natural, but the Rector had no time for wondering. Mrs. Millington stood close by with Mrs. Gilpin and Mrs. Ingpen. She had been surprised to hear that Mrs. Bennet was dancing.

"Really, how very energetic you are," was her greeting; "but I never expected you'd have this sort of dancing at all. I was looking forward to country dances—the good, old-fashioned kind, you know."

"I'm afraid nobody here can dance those."

"How very odd! When I lived in London, our Girl Guides danced them beautifully. It's queer, isn't it, that London girls should know country dances, while country girls can dance only this dreadful modern stuff?"

"We pride ourselves on being very up to date in

Delmonden," Mr. Bennet boomed jocosely—to drown the far from jocund voice within, which was telling Mrs. Millington exactly what he thought of her and her Girl Guides and her country dances.

"I expect they could dance Sir Roger de Coverley," suggested Mrs. Bennet.

"Oh, no, pray do not put anyone to inconvenience on my account. I am only a little disappointed, that's all. I've come to fetch Theresa, and we really ought to be going home now. Do you know where she is?"

"N-no; at least, I had an idea she was dancing."

"Then we'll wait for the end of this dance—unless, perhaps, Mr. Bennet can go and find her."

But at that moment the dance ended, the music ceased, and after some desultory clapping the dancers streamed off the lawn, into the tents or under the trees. Theresa did not appear, and after waiting a little, the Rector went in search of her. But she was not to be found, and he came back alone.

"She and her partner must have slipped off somewhere. Shall we take a stroll round the garden? Then perhaps we shall come upon them; and Mrs. Millington can see the illuminations, which we take rather a pride in—eh, don't we, Lucy?"

They moved off, the three of them together, Mrs. Bennet feeling vaguely miserable and uneasy. The Chinese lanterns hung from all the trees, so that there were no dark corners in the Rectory garden—no secret

places for lovers. It was not that either the Rector or his wife disapproved of lovers or love-making, but sad experience had taught them that these things can sometimes go too far, and that it is a pity when they go too far at a Rectory dance. Once, fifteen years ago, a village scandal was said to have originated at the Garden Party, and ever since then the dark places of the garden had been artistically illuminated; and though of course there was nothing to prevent would-be lovers from straying off into the fields, it was hoped that the continued presence of the bullocks might in a measure safeguard the morals of the community.

10

But there are some lovers so bold, so lost to shame, that they do not require darkness, but will stand embracing even in daylight or in the light of a Chinese lantern hung from a sycamore bough. Just such a pair confronted the Bennets and Mrs. Millington at a turn of the shrubbery path. The light was not enough to show who they were, and the first impulse of the Rector and his wife was to turn quickly away—the Rector because he disliked gazing at the private mysteries of love, his wife because of a sudden impulsive fear. But Mrs. Millington had no such qualms. After a slight check she marched boldly forward, and at once the young couple sprang apart, showing the

flushed, startled faces of George Heasman and Theresa Silk.

For a moment there was complete silence. Everybody was too surprised to speak. It was one of those nightmare moments when help comes only by magical chance. Then Mrs. Millington cried suddenly and harshly:

"Theresa!"

The girl was still clinging to George Heasman's arm. Her hat was pushed back off her hair, her cheeks and her eyes blazed in a confusion which was still half triumphant. Then, suddenly, the boy seemed to recover himself. He put his hand over hers that clung to his sleeve, and threw up his head.

"I love this lady," he said, stammering a little, "and I want to marry her."

Mrs. Bennet gasped. She found her dislike of him surprisingly gone. He looked proud and brave, caught in this sudden plight.

"Don't talk nonsense," said the Rector.

"Theresa, come with me at once," said Mrs. Millington.

"It's true," cried Theresa, her voice sobbing, "it's true."

"It can't be true. I never heard of such a thing in my life. Mr. Bennet, who is this young man?"

"My name's George Heasman, and I can answer for myself. I'm the son of Alfred Heasman of Ethnam, and I'm the preacher at Providence Chapel. I'm not

ashamed of my name or of my profession or of my love for this young lady."

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Bennet would have thought he had it in him to speak like that. They both revised a former bad opinion. Mrs. Millington apparently did not.

"Oh, I know who you are. Your father's a tenant of mine, isn't he?"

"Yes, Ma'am, he is."

"Then will you kindly go away at once? Later on I may require you to apologise for this outrageous conduct."

"I shall not apologise, and I shall not go away and leave my Theresa at your mercy."

"I think you'd better," said Mr. Bennet; "nobody's going to be angry with Theresa if you go, but if you stay there may be a scene——"

"Which you don't want in your garden. I understand, Sir."

"Of course I don't want it in my garden or anywhere else. My dear fellow, we're all very angry, and if we separate we may cool down and be able to talk this over calmly."

"Then you promise that we shall talk it over?"

"No, certainly not!" cried Mrs. Millington; "there is nothing that could possibly be discussed without insulting me and my niece. Your conduct has been unpardonable, Mr. Heasman."

The band had begun to play another dance. Strains

of "Pickin' Cotton" drifted to the little group under the sycamore tree, and at the same time the rest of the garden seemed to come alive, footsteps and voices passed. It was impossible to prolong the scene. Mr. Bennet seized young Heasman by the arm and whispered to him:

"I promise you the matter shall be discussed. I guarantee it absolutely."

"George," said Theresa, "please, please go."

It was so long since she had spoken that her voice came almost as a shock, and as they looked at her they saw that tears were rolling down her face.

III. *Theresa (solar)*

I

IT WOULD BE HARD TO SAY WHO SUFFERED MOST DURING THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED. No doubt the parted lovers had their just claim to sorrow's crown, but they also had their love to sustain them, and the strength of their own constancy. Never, never, they told Mrs. Millington and the Bennets and the Heasmans (who had been made reluctant, surprised participators in the fray), never would they forswear their solemn vows. They bore themselves, whether separate or together, with a queer, stiff gallantry that was unlike them both. Their youth and the exaltation of first love was making their plight into high romance.

Mrs. Millington, on the other hand, had neither youth nor first love to light the stage for her. She suffered from outraged affection and wounded pride, neither of which is dramatically satisfying. She had to face the fact that she knew nothing of Theresa, whom she loved so much. The girl had taken her entirely by surprise, and she had revived before her aunt a certain Arthur Silk whom she had thought long dead. Arthur Silk had come from the dim borderlands of society, wooing Winifred Hurst, stealing her away from her home and her loving, deluded sis-

ter; and now with their daughter it was happening again—though on a still lower level. For Arthur Silk had come of mixed yeoman and gipsy blood, while George Heasman was only the son of an inefficient tenant farmer, and worked in a small-town grocery store, and on Sundays went Bible-thumping in obscure village chapels.

The suitor's family were overwhelmed with fear at their position. Their lease of Ethnam came to an end next year, and for certain she would turn them out. It was just like George, having got them on the wrong side of the Parsonage by turning Methodist, now to make trouble for them with the Manor by this lamentable conduct that they'd never seen the like of in their days.

As for the Bennets, they were rent between conflicting claims. They loved the niece and would have liked to take her part; they did not love the aunt. But they saw that the aunt, and not the niece, was right. The idea of Theresa marrying George Heasman, now or at any time, was almost preposterous. In spite of their improved opinion of the boy they could not see him as a suitable husband for the heiress of Goldstrow.

"He's had nothing but a board-school education," said Mr. Bennet, "and though the Methodists will probably cram a little learning into him before they're done with him, I don't suppose he'll ever be much more than a sort of peasant preacher."

"And what good will it do if he is? I can't see Theresa as a minister's wife."

"Nor can I. Indeed, it's a mystery to me how she ever came to fall in love with him."

"So it is to me. They seem to have nothing in common; indeed, I'm afraid . . . I can't help feeling that it's only a case of . . . since we're alone perhaps I may say it . . . a case of sex attraction."

"I think it's a little more than that. From what I can get out of him—which isn't much, as he's always on the defensive—from what I can get out of him, there is a certain small kinship of mind between them. I'm not so sure about her, but for him she certainly stands for more than sex——"

"Oh, my dear! Of course! I——"

"I mean it's not only her health and her youth that have done it. After all, the young man has ideas and ambitions considerably above his station, and Theresa's a lady—and a more accessible lady than most. He probably finds very little to attract him in girls of his own class, and yet Theresa has something of that class about her—just enough to put him at his ease. From his point of view, I don't see that it's such a bad thing——"

"But she can take no interest in his religious work."

"I'm not so sure of that. She's in love with him, remember. We haven't been able to touch her, but possibly he has."

"Oh, how I wish we could have introduced her to some nice young Churchman."

"My dear, Theresa would never get on with anybody 'nice.' She's got a queer streak in her—I don't know where it comes from—and in some ways George Heasman's more her going than any well-educated, well-bred chap could be."

"You almost talk as if you were on their side."

"I'm not—of course I'm not. But it's a difficult problem. I only hope Mrs. Millington won't make a hopeless mess of it."

"I don't think she will. She's very fond of Theresa, you know."

"But I doubt if Theresa's very fond of her."

"No, I'm afraid she's not. But Theresa's not unreasonable. Poor child . . . she doesn't seem quite to understand what's happened to her. She used to be such a tomboy, and now . . . why, she said to me only last time I saw her, 'Oh, Mrs. Bennet, I never used to care about men; I thought all that kind of thing so silly; yet now I can't even think of George without wanting to cry!'—and she did cry, too, poor child."

"Poor child. I wonder what this will make of her."

"A woman, perhaps."

"Bah!" cried the Rector, suddenly and angrily. "It's only calf love. Why do we all make such a fuss about it?"

2

At last the matter was settled. The lovers were to part. There seemed no alternative, since the law of the land made a runaway marriage impossible. Mr. Bennet succeeded in impressing on young Heasman that nothing could happen till Theresa was twenty-one. On her twenty-first birthday she would be a free agent and also would inherit a small sum of money. Let them wait till then. If their love endured the vigil, then its worth was proved and it could claim a noble independence.

He himself did not expect it thus to win its spurs. At first, of course, a secret correspondence would be maintained, and vows pass through the post, so beautiful that one would expect the very postman's feet to fly like an angel's over the road. Then letters and vows would both grow rarer, then shamefaced, then the postman's feet would drag slowly in the mud, as he handed in the letter that at last confessed "it had all been a mistake," and some other man was going to lead Theresa away or some other girl keep house for Heasman.

Naturally he did not tell the young people this, and his restraint was in part responsible for the outward smoothness of Mrs. Millington's victory. She herself declared that the parting was for ever. It was an out-

rage that Theresa should live even in young Heasman's thoughts. As for the girl, she must at once be taken out into society and introduced to all the eligible young men that it was possible to find in her aunt's somewhat elderly circle of acquaintance. Mrs. Millington babbled of house-parties at Goldstrow, of Captain This and Sir Somebody That, and sending Theresa to London for the Little Season.

In her wiser moments the details of the separation were settled on more practical ground. She would find another job for Heasman that would take him right out of the district. She knew one of the directors of the United Tea Company, and he would see about transferring the young man to another branch. She did not know anybody on the Central Council of the Calvinistic Methodists, but doubtless when their evangelist was commercially translated they would provide him with a new religious field. If he refused to go, then his father and mother would be turned out of Ethnam as soon as the law allowed.

To Mr. Bennet this was not a fair fight, and he deeply sympathised with the sore and outraged Heasman, though it was his business to persuade him into agreement.

"After all, neither of you could be happy if you went on living within a dozen miles of each other. Apart from all this, you would be bound to go away."

"I've got my work at Providence and my work at

Iden Green, and it's as important to me as your work at Delmonden is to you. I bet you wouldn't clear out of your Rectory for anybody's threats."

All this was a great pity, thought Mr. Bennet, and he was not really the man who ought to have been sent to negotiate with young George, who insisted on viewing him as a proud prelate triumphing over the lay evangelist. However, he would make the best of it he could.

"If, as a young man, I'd ever found myself in your position with regard to a young woman, I honestly think I should have cleared out. In our job there's always plenty of work to be done everywhere, and I haven't a doubt but that the Methodist Council, or whatever settles these things for you, will be only too glad of your services wherever you go. If you stay, you won't be doing the slightest good to Theresa or to yourself, and to your own people you'll be doing definite harm."

"It's outrageous that she should blackmail me like this."

"I quite agree—it is outrageous. Still, there it is. She's quite within her rights, and we can't do anything about it."

"If I go you'll all spend all your time trying to turn Theresa against me."

"I promise you that my wife and I will do nothing of the kind."

"But Mrs. Millington will."

"Her influence goes for very little."

The young man glared into the embers of Ethnam's kitchen, where this uneasy interview was taking place.

"You can't pretend," he said thickly, "that you aren't all of you against me. It isn't only her auntie that thinks I'm not fit to touch her."

"Come, come, my dear fellow, you're imagining what isn't true."

"It is true. You know you look down on me. You're saying in your heart that I'm only a boy in a shop—I'm only a lay preacher, that hopes to be a minister some day. But, even when I'm a minister, I shan't be a gentleman—not like your Established priests, who are always gentlemen no matter where they were raised. . . . Ha, ha! I know some tales about that."

"No doubt you do. So do I. Please don't think I'm being a snob over this. If I've suggested . . . or asked —asked you to ask yourself certain questions . . . it's only on the score of suitability of character. Birth and education have some influence on that, you know."

"Theresa isn't particularly well educated, and she's more fond of queer company than I am."

"And how does she fit in with your religious life?"

"She likes my religion. It's the first time she's ever met a religion that isn't all dressed up—and she likes it. That's another thing that'll happen when I go away

—you'll try and get her back to the Church—that's never given her the Gospel . . . ."

"I'll certainly give her all the Gospel I can," said Mr. Bennet, beginning to lose his temper.

He saw there was no longer any profit in the interview, and hurried it to an end. He must not quarrel with this preposterous young fellow, however much he asked for it.

His forbearance was rewarded, and in the course of the next week he succeeded in persuading George Heasman to accept Mrs. Millington's terms. He made no more efforts to induce him to question his own wisdom. After all, the next three years would make plain just how much enduring quality there was in his love. So it was all arranged—that Heasman was to go away to Newbury in Oxfordshire, and take over the management of the United Tea Company's Stores in that town. It would mean promotion and an increase of salary for him, so Delmonden would not be able definitely to link his departure from Cranbrook with the terrification that was said to have happened at the Parish Garden Party. The only drawback was that arrangements could not be made for him to "take over" till the middle of October, now more than a month ahead. Mrs. Millington, however, said she would go to London with Theresa till he was safely out of the district.

An alternative plan came rather surprisingly from

Theresa herself. If she must go away, must she go to London, which she hated? Might she not go with Mr. and Mrs. Bennet to Brighton, when their holiday began next week? It was a suggestion that pleased neither Mrs. Millington nor the Bennets themselves. Their annual holiday had always been something in the nature of a honeymoon, and Theresa would be the intolerable third. On the other hand they were touched by the poor child's affection, and well aware that her aunt was not the most suitable companion for her in her new unhappiness. If she was with them, they could comfort and cheer her, and perhaps do something to win her rebel soul. It was a chance that they had no right to throw away.

As for Mrs. Millington, she was naturally hurt that Theresa should prefer other company to hers, but it would be convenient not to have to go up to town just now, when her interests and activities were all in the country. Also, she was temporarily pleased with the Bennets for what they had done during the last week or two. Mr. Bennet had been invaluable as a go-between, he had talked that impossible young man into reason and compliance, and he and his wife had somehow managed between them to damp down any scandal there might have been in Delmonden—which means that they had taken steps to ensure that none of it should reach her ears. To crown all, she was anxious to please Theresa, the being whom she loved

and had hopelessly offended . . . Theresa should realise that her aunt was ready to give her anything in the world she wanted as long as it involved only her own sacrifice.

So it was arranged that Theresa should go with the Bennets to Brighton, as their paying-guest, and that their holiday should be prolonged to the full month at Mrs. Millington's expense. Which, as they were humble souls, pleased them extraordinarily well.

3

The Bennets always went to the same rooms in Brighton every year. They were not on the sea front, but Mrs. Bennet declared that it was quieter and healthier as well as cheaper up at Preston, and of course there was Preston Park. . . . They had "partial board" only, which meant that they did not have to come back from the sea for luncheon, but could eat it in the exciting surroundings of the Regent or Sherry's, or more economically in some bun-shop on the Parade.

Every year there were certain things that they did—that they had done for the last twenty years, so that they had by now acquired almost the solemnity and obligation of religious rites. One of these was lunch at the Metropole. Every year a sum of money was set aside for it, and a day chosen when Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, dressed in their very best, sat stern with ex-

citement in the Restaurant des Ambassadeurs, and reverently ate the table d'hôte luncheon, washed down with half a bottle of Sauterne. Then there was always a matinée at one of the theatres, and a ceremonial visit to each of the piers, a cinema, and a char-à-banc drive. They also went a great deal to church.

This, curiously enough, was a great diversion when on holiday. One would have thought that Mr. Bennet had enough church during the year to make his holiday consist, at least in part, of his emancipation from it. But this was far from being the case. Going to other clergymen's churches was as big a change as not going to church at all, and more satisfying to the conscience. After all, to lie in bed all the morning or to lounge on the cliffs by Rottingdean could scarcely be more remote in style from Sunday morning service in Delmonden than High Mass in one of the great cathedrals of the London, Brighton, and South Coast religion. The thronging crowds, the thundering music, the soaring voices, the scarlet cassocks, the incense, the banners, the candles, the flowers, the lace were all to this poor pagan priest, who for twenty-five years had ministered the religion of the villages, much what the Lord Mayor's Banquet would be to a hungry workingman. Indeed High Mass at St. Bartholomew's stood in much the same relation to services in Delmonden Church as lunch at the Metropole stood in relation to lunches at Delmonden Rectory.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet visited devoutly all the principal churches in Brighton. They went of course to St. Bartholomew's, towering like Noah's Ark above the London Road; they went to St. Martin's, the soldiers' church, to St. Paul's with its cavernous approaches, All Saints, All Souls, and up the hill to the gay little Annunciation, and to St. Michael's, which very considerately kept its Patronal Festival during the Bennets' holiday. Occasionally he went to call on certain clergy whom he knew, but not often, because he did not seem quite to belong to their world. Their talk was sometimes too remote from realities—when they asked him if he ever gave Benediction, and what he did to keep the women in bounds . . . apparently they suffered from the excessive piety of their flocks, which compelled them to provide more services than they were inclined to. Delmonden was not like that.

It might be considered doubtful how far Miss Theresa Silk would fit in with such a holiday. But she was unexpectedly accommodating. She did not like going to church, nor did she particularly want to have lunch at the Metropole, but she would be happy for hours putting her pennies into the slots of the automatic machines on the Palace Pier, or paddling about in one of the paddle boats on the pool on the Lower Parade. Also she had friends in the district. There was a family at Hove who occasionally relieved the Bennets of her company, and out at Henfield lived an

old school friend whom now and then she went to see. This girl once came into Brighton and proved rather astonishing as a friend of Theresa's, for she was elegant and sophisticated and feminine, with beautiful clothes and a carefully powdered face on which her thin, plucked eyebrows maintained an unfaltering arch of surprise.

But Theresa herself had changed. The Bennets could see that, now that they had her to themselves. In her manners she was still a tomboy, preferring the Pier to the shop windows and the paddle boats to the Parade; but the focus of her life had shifted—it had become feminine. She had no longer that queer, hard air of boyishness, or rather of the creature that is neither girl nor boy. One could imagine her talking feminine secrets with Violet Clutter, planning feminine campaigns.

Her general air was far more cheerful than anybody had expected. She never spoke of George Heasman—she would not speak of him. If Mrs. Bennet ever, when they were alone, led the conversation that way with a view to comfort and good advice, she was resolutely evaded. Sometimes she felt a little hurt that Theresa would no longer confide in her—she wondered if she confided in Violet Clutter. She was a queer, hard little thing, after all. . . . Of course they were both quite sure that she and George wrote to each other, but not a word was said. Only sometimes

her eyelids would droop over a shining mystery, that might have been rapture or that might have been tears.

4

One day, when they were within a week of their return to Delmonden, Theresa set out for her last visit to Henfield. The Bennets had as usual gone down to the Parade, carrying a string bag which contained their library novels, their spectacles, Mr. Bennet's office book, and Mrs. Bennet's knitting, also some stale bread for the sea-gulls.

Theresa watched them go with a certain sense of pathos. They looked so old and so innocent. It was a shame to deceive them. She watched them walking together towards their bus-stop, arm in arm, Mr. Bennet's old black coat seeming to reflect the parrot-green of his wife's rather than to manifest its own decay. They were laughing and talking, full of the excitement of their ridiculous day—so utterly unsuspicious. . . .

She never used to feel about them like this. She had always found them funny, but never pathetic. Was it because she was deceiving them, or was it merely one of those queer things that had happened lately—part of the ever-growing torment of her tears? She never used to cry. She cried over everything now—over nothing at all, such as the old Bennets wandering off together to sit on the beach till it was time to

get up and eat buns, then to sit on the beach again till it was time to get up and go to evensong. She ought to laugh really—not cry.

She wiped one or two tears away as she took her seat in the bus. She was not really crying about them at all—she did not know what she was crying about. . . . In a way it would be a relief when George was gone, and yet, how could she bear it? She clenched her hands upon her lap, and tossed her head back so that no more tears should fall. Through the window she could see the calm pure outline of the downs, dark against the crystal sky of Autumn. A new sense of self-pity nearly choked her. Oh, how happy she had been six months ago, when without a care in her heart she had wandered free about the country, seeking queer things—never sorry either for herself or for other people. Why had that lovely world departed from her?

5

George met her where the bus stopped at Muddles Wood corner. They did not say much to each other, for at first meeting a great shyness always overwhelmed them. It was almost as if they met as strangers every time. The sight of George, big, brown-faced, golden-haired, whose voice and whose touch were so dear, always for some strange reason made Theresa a little afraid. As for George, he longed for the moment

when there should be no further need for the speech he found so difficult. Once he had taken her in his arms, the barriers between them would have melted, and words need no longer stumble and fail.

"Are we going to Violet's?" he asked awkwardly.

"No, not today. I've settled that."

"I'm glad."

George did not like Violet. He did not approve of her powdered face and plucked, surprised eyebrows, nor of the worldly way in which she regarded everything, their love included. It humiliated and embarrassed him to have to accept the cloak she offered. But otherwise how could they meet? And they must meet in these sorrowful days, before they were to be parted for so long.

"Where shall we go then?" he asked.

"I dunno. Up on the downs—or there's a fair at Twineham."

"Oh, don't let's go to a fair—among a lot of people on our last day."

The image of the fair dropped from her, scarcely formed.

"Very well, then, we'll go up on the downs. It's going to be lovely."

They set off together along the road, turning off it at the first throws. The little lane led steeply up and down on its eccentric way towards Small Dole; against the southward sky rose the Downs of Edburton, with Fulking at their roots. It was one of those days of

crystalline brightness that are set like diamonds among the autumn mists. The sky was washed clear blue by a high wind that troubled not the earth. The outlines of distant fields and woods and farms were sharp for many miles away. The little white-rimmed windows shone like eyes, and the brooks were like half-hidden swords among the trees. Turning as they climbed from Small Dole, they could see as far as Horsham and Itchingfield, with the high places of Surrey beyond. From behind them, over the hill, came the soft croon of a siren upon the sea, to show where the fogs waited.

At Fulking they bought a pocketful of bread and cheese, and then there was only a short, stiff breathless climb between them and the solitudes they longed for. All the way from Henfield they had not talked much —merely a few gruff questions and answers.

"Have you settled your lodgings yet?"

"Yes; 15, Pitt Street. I'll write it down."

"What time do you go tomorrow?"

"Twelve-eighteen."

"Will you come home for your holidays?"

"Not till the new lease for Ethnam's signed."

"Have you heard from the Council?"

"No."

During the last fierce climb they did not speak at all, but toiled up silently, panting side by side over the last of the thyme and the bee orchis, till the top was won. Here, long ago, the first men of the south

had built a camp, piling earthworks against the foe advancing from the trackless forest which is now the weald. The centuries had made of this warlike place a sweet green garth, with turf-scented walls to shut out the chastening of the wind, and hollows that trapped the sunshine. George and Theresa cast themselves down, breathless, happy, smiling captains of the fort.

For a moment they lay motionless, just filling their lungs while their bodies throbbed in a relief of sweet rest. Then George put out his hand and found Theresa's. She felt his fingers, warm, hard, strong, and a little rough, close over hers; and, as months ago in Providence Chapel, her heart seemed to falter, while through her blood stole a strange sickness and ecstasy.

"Oh, George—Oh . . ."

With a sudden movement she turned her face, burying it in her arm. Lifting himself on his elbow, he could see nothing but her tawny bunch of hair, more vivid than ever against Edburton's green.

"Terry, what is it? My dear!"

His other arm came over her, he held her close. He could feel her warm and trembling against him, and his love grew bigger to receive a sweetness of compassion that was almost maternal.

"My little bird—my pretty little bird."

"Oh, Georgie . . ."

"What is it, pretty one?"

"Nothing—only that we're alone together at last."

And for the last time. He would not spoil their

hour by saying it, but the shadow of their parting already lay on the hill—the shadow that waited with the fog to rise at twilight and swallow up the beauty of their diamond day.

"Terry, kiss me."

She lifted her face, and their lips met, and as the long kiss ended they tasted each other's tears.

"You mustn't go—you mustn't go."

She had flung her arms round him, clinging with all her strength.

"I don't want to go. It's dreadful; but what can I do? . . . with those people all hunting and driving us?"

"Let me come with you."

"But we couldn't be married—the law won't allow it till you're twenty-one, without your auntie's consent. Oh, they've got us every way all right."

"I don't care about being married. I'll come without that—but I can't live without you."

A month ago these words would have shocked him, but now his love for Theresa lived in a world that was out of sight of Providence Chapel.

"My darling, that wouldn't be fair. You would be miserable, and I expect they would be able to get you away from me."

"No, they wouldn't. Oh, no, they wouldn't. Let 'em try . . . and couldn't we pretend I was twenty-one and get married in some place where they didn't know us?"

"They'd find out about us all right. I tell you, I've been looking into these things, for I've wanted the same as you. But it's no good. We can't be married without your auntie's consent until you're twenty-one, unless we go before a magistrate and say her consent's been 'unreasonably withheld' or some such."

"Well, couldn't we do that?"

"There's not a magistrate who wouldn't back her up. They'd all think I was a cad, and was after your money—and maybe you'll think it yourself before you're twenty-one."

"Oh, I shan't! I shan't! How can you be so cruel?"

She burst into tears—those dreadful tears that would come and spoil their times together. Her sobs seemed something outside herself—a wild beast seizing and shaking her.

"Terry, don't. . . ."

He put his arms round her and held her close to him till the convulsion passed.

"Georgie, I didn't know love was like this."

"It isn't really. This is only what other people have made it for us. We'll be happy in the end. I promise you, dear. It isn't quite three years to wait, and then we'll be together always. After all, lots of people are engaged as long as that in the ordinary way. My sister Alice——"

"But never to see each other all the time . . ."

"We shall see each other. We'll find ways of meeting, and once that lease is signed I shan't mind turning

up at Ethnam now and again. Think of me as if I was out in India or Egypt or somewhere, the way lots of girls' sweethearts are."

Thus he tried to soothe her, and they ate their bread and cheese, and all the while the sun spilled down on them, calling out the scents of turf and thyme from Edburton hill. It was a surprise, almost a shock, when, their food all eaten, thinking to ease their sorrows by a walk, they looked out over the camp wall to see below all round them a white ocean of fog, drifting up from the Channel across the down and over the wealden valley. The sun shone down on it, and it looked like a flood of gleaming marble waves, a sea of moonstone, with rifts in it through which the sunbeams went to stroke the fields below. It was so beautiful that at first they hardly realised that it had made them prisoners. Their camp was an island of sunshine rising out of that sea, which had swallowed up all landmarks save other summits far away.

"Well," said George at last, "that settles us. We'll have to stay here for the afternoon."

"I don't mind if we stay here for ever."

She crouched up against him, holding him tight in her arms. It seemed as if she could never hold him quite close enough.

"My Terry," he whispered, comforting her, "my own little girl—who's some day going to be all mine."

"I'm all yours now," she answered him, and he could not find it in his heart to tell her there was

more to give, though his whole being ached with the lack.

But she too was aware of it, in spite of her innocence. Her body was full of a consciousness that did not touch her mind. Her arms dragged him closer, and she pressed her hot face against his, so that once again it was wet with her tears.

"Darling, don't 'ee cry. It hurts me."

"I know, I know . . . but I can't help it. Oh, what's happened to me? Why must I feel like this?"

Nearly crying himself he began to kiss her tears away.

"Georgie, I can't bear you to go. We must be married—oh, we must."

"Sweetheart, don't . . ."

He began to tremble, and suddenly he pushed her from him.

"What is it?" she cried. "Oh, don't be angry with me. I know I'm a fool, but—but I can't help it . . . and I'm sorry—sorry . . ."

"Terry, you don't know what you're doing."

She had crept up close to him again, and her arms were round him, straining him to her with a helpless passion that made him feel almost faint with conflict. Why must they suffer so, he and his darling love? What right had these self-righteous, class-conscious people to keep them from each other? . . . "Oh, Terry, Terry—you don't know what you're doing." He made

one feeble effort to free himself, but he had not the power.

"I love you, I love you," she was murmuring to him, while her hands stroked his face, and tried to turn it towards her kisses. He loved Terry. . . . Oh, how he loved her! His love was driving him mad. . . . He could no longer turn his face from her, the lovely, precious thing . . . their lips met, and fire passed over them—a hot, sweet gust that seemed to burn away at once both his wisdom and her ignorance.

His kisses suddenly changed, and she stiffened in his arms with fear. But it was too late now—he could not and would not let her go, and his arms held her in spite of the pity of his heart as she struggled against him. Then the next moment she relaxed, with an abandonment that first surprised and then intoxicated him.

The sun beat down upon Edburton hill, till the scent of the turf was as the scent of the sunshine. Outside their refuge, the world that had persecuted the lovers lay drowned at the bottom of a white sea, rolling slowly over it. They had forgotten it. They were alone, cast away on their island, alone with the sun. Their love had ceased to concern itself with the ways of the world under the fog. It followed the way of the sun with Edburton hill. To his fiery need and her self-offering ignorance there seemed no other way. It was as if they had learned this lesson long ago, long

before they were born, in dim ages when the sun first shone upon the earth.

6

The afternoon wore on, and they must have slept, for George had a dream. He dreamed that he and Theresa were sitting together in a field full of flowers. She wore a white wedding-dress, and they were going to be married. Old Mr. Bennet came stepping across the fields, with a book under his arm, to marry them. Then George suddenly realised in his dream, that it was wrong to be married out in the fields. He must have a believer's wedding . . . and immediately they were in Providence Chapel, walking up the aisle together. But when they came under the pulpit, he saw to his horror that there were two of himself—Theresa's bridegroom and the minister who towered above them with the book. He was both—monstrously divided. An infinite terror ran through him. The chapel was full of a cold mist, that chilled and thickened. Theresa seemed to fall back into it, and all he saw was his own face glaring down on him. He woke in a sweat of fear.

The sun was gone, and the mist was everywhere. Thick, cold, and white it lay over them, so that even the camp walls showed dimly through it. Their island had been swallowed up by the sea. Starting up on his elbow he looked round for Theresa. There she lay

huddled against him, and her eyes had just opened. They opened lazily and sweetly, and suddenly all the fear of his dream was gone, as he stooped to kiss her warm, sweet face.

"Georgie—darling, darling Georgie."

He could not speak. His throat felt thick with love. He could only kiss her and kiss her, stroking her hair back from her darling face that smiled at him.

"My own Georgie."

"My sweet, my love, my baby."

He nearly cried. Then suddenly he laughed.

"Look what's happened to us."

"The fog?"

"Yes, it's everywhere now."

"So much the better; we must stay where we are."

He looked up into the drifting layers. They were all white; the dusk was still far off, but the turf under his head was wet, all the thyme wore pearls. . . . With that maternal, protective quality still lingering in his love, he was anxious for her.

"We can't stay here; you'll get wet, you'll catch cold. It's quite light, and we can easily find our way off the hill in spite of the fog. I'll take you somewhere warm."

"But I don't want to leave you. You won't send me home, will you?"

How could he send her home? Their love seemed only just begun. Kneeling upright there upon the fog-soaked turf, they clung like two children, their

arms straining about each other, their cheeks pressed close. The thought of their parting at Muddles Wood corner was terror and misery. It simply could not be. They must not part till he was finally obliged to set out for exile. The fog, drifting round them, blotting them into their refuge, was like a miracle specially worked for their sakes.

"The fog won't let us go home," murmured Theresa; "we must stay here."

"We can't stay here. You'd catch cold and die, my darling. But I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll spend the night at some cottage or farmhouse. Then in the morning I can get back to Cranbrook in time to catch my train."

This in the almost giddy state they were in at the moment seemed an excellent plan. It was not till they had gone some way and the camp on Edburton hill was lost behind them in the chill white cloud, that they began to think of difficulties. Then Theresa cried suddenly:

"What about the Bennets?"

"Oh, I'd forgotten them."

"They'll be frantic if I don't come back—and perhaps they'll wire to Aunt Eleanor."

The Bennets had lost the pathetic halo which had invested them in the morning. She thought of them only in relation to their powers of betraying her.

"Are they on the telephone?"

"Yes, they are. I could ring up, of course, and tell them I'm spending the night with Violet."

"That's a good idea. We'll do it from Fulking."

He no longer disapproved of Violet's cloak. He took it and wore it gladly.

But they never reached Fulking. The fog that spread all round them disguised the hillside and jumbled north and south. By the time they reached the bottom, all they could see was another hill rising steeply ahead. There was no trace of any village, house or road. They must have turned southward into the downs and be walking away from the weald.

"Never mind," said Theresa, "we needn't care."

So peculiar was their mood that at first they didn't. Arm in arm, hugged close side to side, they tramped over the mist-pearled grass, their faces and clothes all wet with the fog that drifted over them, their bodies warm with each other's warmth, their hearts warm with love's red fire—red and glowing though it burned green boughs.

But, after a while, Theresa began to feel tired, began to think that a hot cup of tea would be welcome. Also she began to worry again about the Bennets. Suppose they did not reach a village till the post office was shut and it was too late to telephone. The Bennets would be sure to get in a funk about her if she didn't come home. Would they wire to Aunt Eleanor? Or would they ring up Violet? And would Violet have the resource to say that Theresa was spending the night

with her? Possibly she would and possibly she would not.

"What's worrying you, sweetheart?" said George.

"Only that I feel it's time we got somewhere, or the post office may be shut and we shan't be able to 'phone the Bennets."

"It's only just turned half past four . . . and if we don't find a post office we'll go to a private house."

They walked on for another three-quarters of an hour, and the mist was beginning to grow soiled and dingy with twilight when they suddenly came down on the village of Upper Beeding. The lights were on in the little houses, for the fog was bringing the dusk early. The post office was warm with lamplight, and also announced that it provided tea.

George ordered tea for them in the little back parlour, while Theresa went to the telephone. To her relief, the Bennets had not yet come in, so all she did was to leave a message with their landlady to the effect that Violet Clutter had asked her to stop on for the night, and that she would be back soon after breakfast the next morning . . . "and tell them not to ring me up, because we're going out to dinner with some friends of Miss Clutter's."

She thought this last lie rather a clever one. It made her feel as in the old days when she explored London's by-ways, or on some recent adventure at Delmonden. She was good at constructive as well as at purely negative lying. But she had never lied to anyone she liked

as much as the Bennets. For a moment their pathos came back in a faint aureole. Poor funny old things!

She was in a thoughtful mood as she returned to George at the tea-table. But it soon passed. Growing rested and warmer with the hot friendly meal in the friendly lamplight, she planned the future with him —the only future that mattered now—of this one night.

"We might go to the inn here," she suggested.

"I don't think we'd better go to an inn, a cottage or a farmhouse would be quieter. Perhaps the people here could tell us of one."

They questioned the post office girl, and she suggested a farmhouse down the valley of the Ardur, by Botolphs, or, if they liked, there was a house at Flitterbanks, on the Storrington road.

"Are you on a walking tour?" she asked.

"Yes," said Theresa.

The girl looked at them curiously.

"What's happened to your luggage? You'll want a change tonight."

"We sent our luggage on by train to Arundel," said Theresa, glibly; "but the fog delayed us, and we'll never get so far."

George stared at her open-mouthed. He did not know she could lie like that.

"There's a train goes to Arundel from Bramber at seven-four. If I were you I'd go after your luggage. You'll catch your deaths of cold in those wet things."

"Thanks very much. We know how to manage," said Theresa, loftily.

She was annoyed, because the post office girl was too sharp for her. She hoped there were not many more as sharp as that.

Unfortunately there were.

When at last they found Botolphs, lost in the mists that streamed up the Ardur from Shoreham, the farmer's wife eyed them suspiciously. She held the door half open while they talked, asking her for supper and a room for the night, telling her that same story about their luggage, only making out that it was at Lurgashall, so that she should not send them after it by train.

"I dunno. I'm sure I couldn't say. I döan't think as I've a room to spare, now wud the children here."

"We'll pay in advance," said George, and took a ten-shilling note out of his pocket.

The woman seemed to hesitate. Then she suddenly opened the door wider, so that the lamplight from the passage streamed over them. Theresa could almost feel her stare upon her ringless hand.

"No, I'm afraid I couldn't do it. I döan't let lodgings as a rule—leastways not like this." And she banged the door.

The lovers gazed forlornly at each other.

"It's because I haven't got a wedding ring," said Theresa.

"The idea of her looking for that!"

"I could see that she was."

A spate of indignation rose to George's lips, but was suddenly checked by the thought that thus he would have acted himself, thus his mother would have acted. Folk had the good name of their house to think of, and were not likely to give lodging to nameless, ringless, and luggageless strangers, no matter what money they could show.

Sorrowfully they turned away, back towards Upper Beeding.

"There's two things we must have," said he, "luggage and a wedding ring."

"I could wear your ring, Georgie."

He wore one of those large metal rings that are considered a protection against rheumatism, and before they went any further into the inhospitable darkness, he took it off and put it on her finger. It was very much too big, but by clenching her hand she could keep it in place and endure the most searching glares of farmers' wives. When George saw it on her hand, his heart melted, and taking the little brown clenched hand in his he kissed it and the ring upon it.

"Darling—that's our wedding ring. In spite of all they've done to part us, you're my wife."

7

Thick darkness had fallen by the time they were back at Upper Beeding. But there were lights and cottages

all along the Storrington Road—Bramber and then Steyning lit up the wet surfaces, and sent a red glare into the fog. At Steyning the shops were still open, and at one of them George bought a cheap suitcase and at another some rather queer night clothes for himself and Theresa. They had now removed their two chief reproaches—they had luggage and a wedding ring. It would no longer be so difficult to convince people that they were a respectable young couple on holiday.

Unfortunately, their purchases did not leave them with much money for a night's lodging. An inn was now out of the question, though by this time George's objections had been worn down by the hard roads under his feet and the weight of the suitcase on his arm. They must find a place that would take them in for a very few shillings, and perhaps that place would be hard to find. Theresa was by now feeling thoroughly tired, and a little cold, but she slouched on gamely beside George, her cold hands deep in her pockets, while now and then a little tune played round her lips.

After leaving Steyning, the road ran on, houseless, for some way. It was impossible to see if it still followed the course of the Downs, for the fog was everywhere, and hills, woods, and fields were all alike. It was a main road, much used, and every now and then a great glare would light up the fog—a conflagration that moved swiftly towards them, seeming to fill all space. They would cower side by side in the

ditch, scarcely knowing how the danger approached, till at last the fiery mist seemed to condense into two angry, flaring eyes, sweeping past them with a shadow which they knew was the body of a big car. This happened about every two minutes, and by the time they reached Flitterbanks, a little group of houses by Storrington throws, they were sore with the frightened anger of the pedestrian, which must be not unlike the frightened anger of the first man in an age of dinosaurs.

They found the cottage which had been recommended to them at Upper Beeding, but disappointment met them on the doorstep, in spite of suitcase and wedding ring. Yes, Mrs. Pepper had rooms to let, but they were full . . . any other time. . . . Howsumever (and now they saw that their efforts had not been in vain), Mrs. Clements at New Hatch on the Findon Road was empty. Her gentry had gone last Monday. They'd come to it if they turned south at the throws —the first house; there was the name on the gate and a big board up——

So off they trudged again, by this time thoroughly weary.

"If she hasn't a bedroom we'll ask if we may sleep in the kitchen," said George; "you look just about fagged, my dear."

She gave him a sudden smile, which he could hardly see in the darkness.

"I didn't know it would be so difficult. But any-

way, we're together. We shan't have to say good-bye till the last minute."

With this comfort they walked on, and came at last to a small lonely cottage, set almost flush with the road. There was a light in one of the lower windows, and a large notice-board was nailed to the fence.

"Here we are," cried George; "she told us there was a big board up."

"But look what it says!" cried Theresa.

The board said in large white letters on a black ground—"Repent ye and believe the Gospel."

"This can't be the place," said George, and his voice in the fog sounded suddenly as if he meant to turn and run away.

"It must be. She said it was the first house we came to, with a big board . . . and there's 'New Hatch' on the gate."

"I don't like the look of it."

"Oh, never mind. We really must get in somewhere—we can't go tramping on forever."

She opened the neat little gate and marched up to the door, George following her unwillingly. When Theresa knocked he felt that some stern elder would open the door, with scrutiny in his eyes and judgment on his lips. But instead there appeared a pleasant-faced young woman, who seemed perfectly willing to accommodate them without many questions.

"Yes, we've got a good room. Our lodgers left on Monday. The bed isn't made up, but I'll soon see

about that. . . . Supper? Well, we've only a bit of bacon in the house, but I could fry you some rashers . . . six shillings for the two of you—will that do?"

It just would, leaving them a little money over for emergencies and their fare home. They followed the young woman into the house, which seemed fresh and tidy, and upstairs into a front bedroom. The lamp that she carried revealed walls gaily papered and a window hung with Nottingham lace. There was an iron bedstead and a jumble of cheap furniture, but a certain air of cheerfulness and comfort.

"I'll bring your supper up to you. Or would you rather have it downstairs in the kitchen?"

"I think we'd rather you brought it here," said Theresa, who seemed to have taken charge of the proceedings.

"Why do you have that text written up so big on the fence?" asked George.

"Oh, that was Father's doing. He used to be a Free Christian before he got his tumour. This house is on the Worthing road, you see, so he thought he'd give Scripture to all the motorists going by. Which reminds me, those people broke the blind before they left, and I'm afraid you'll find the cars make a lot of light in the room as well as noise."

"Oh, never mind," said Theresa; "we shan't have to dodge 'em, anyway."

As the girl left the room, she pulled off her soaked

hat, throwing it on the bed, and all her hair flew out like fire in the lamplight.

"Georgie . . ."

"Oh, my dear."

"Don't look so stuck and solemn. What's the matter?"

"Nothing—nothing."

She held out her arms, and he ran to her, hiding his face against her neck, under the fiery cloud of her hair.

"You're not worrying about that old text? It's nothing to do with us. We're married, Georgie. You said so. It's the way the gipsies marry. It's the way you get married in Scotland or some such place—I've heard it ever so many times. You just give a ring, and say 'I take you for my wife.' They've tried to stop us and they haven't been able to. You said it yourself a little time ago."

Thus she smoothed the troubled waters of his soul.

8

That night George Heasman dreamed again. It was the same monstrous dream of the marriage in the fields that became the marriage in Providence Chapel. Only this time there was no mist. The chapel was full of a strange light, like fire, and he could see clearly his own face staring down at him from the pulpit, from behind the Book. Theresa had vanished—it seemed as if she had never been there. He stood face to face

with himself, meeting his own indignant soul in judgment. George the Preacher towered above poor George the Bridegroom, and his mouth formed horrible silent words. Then suddenly he smote the Book and shouted in a loud voice, "Repent ye and believe the Gospel," and at the same time flames ran out from under the covers of the Book, and passed searing over George in a terrible glare that consumed without heat, burning him up in agonies of light. . . .

He woke, sitting up in bed, all steeped in the light of a passing motor car that had flung the beam of its headlamps over the ceiling, over the bed, wheeling and sinking and dying away, measuring with a few seconds the eternity of his dream.

"O God!" he cried. "O God!"

Theresa lay sleeping, curled up on her side, but the sight of her could not, as on Edburton hill, pluck him from judgment. He had fallen asleep the happy lover beside his beloved; he had wakened the convicted sinner, face to face with hell.

"Mercy!" he cried.

Then he sprang out of bed, and, crossing the room, fell on his knees by the window. Theresa did not wake, and for a moment she was to him scarcely a living creature. She was only the source and partner of his sin, an instrument of the evil powers that had compassed and overthrown him. He could hardly realise the full blackness of his fall, though his whole mind was shadowed by it. He was like a man drown-

ing, who fights blindly great weights and movements of water. At the same time he was like a man awaking to find he has committed a murder in his sleep. He looked back on the last day and night with loathing and perplexity. How could he have done this thing—Both done it and found it sweet. Its sweetness was unreal to him now—a dream, a tale. All that was real was this awful desolation, this ravening contrition—"Repent ye and believe the Gospel."

George the Preacher had driven away George the Bridegroom. He no longer lived banished in dreams, but stalked through daylight as its possessor. It was George the Bridegroom who had become a dream, who lived in dimly remembered, scattered fragments of life, moments of sunshine on Edburton hill and of fog in the valley of the Ardur. . . . Oh, how George the Preacher hated George the Bridegroom! He would have liked to cast him even out of memory; he would have given all he possessed for him never to have lived. As for the Bride, he could not hate her, but his thoughts of her were turned to bitterness, and made him hate his other self the more; for the Bridegroom had taken her from the Preacher, to whom she belonged, and had made her an instrument of those black powers whom it was the Preacher's business to fight. Unhappy Bridegroom and unhappy Bride, and unhappy Preacher, who now must repent for them both.

Scarcely knowing what he did, he struggled from his knees, and began to dress. Through the blind-

less windows, pale bands and streamers of light could be seen, with the outline of the downs like a black shadow upon the sky. The fog had gone, or rather had risen, hanging like a cloud, which afterwards the wind would scatter into the north. The dawn was still too faint to make much light in the room, and, as George groped and stumbled in the darkness of his mind as well as of his surroundings, he pushed over the table on which their supper things of yesterday evening had been laid. There was a deafening crash, which even Theresa's deep and healthy sleep could not withstand. She started up, flushed, bewildered and a little frightened.

"What was that? What is it, George? Where are you?"

Then she saw him blocked against the window.

"What are you doing?"

"I've upset the supper tray."

He began to grope stupidly for the things that had fallen, searching for them and putting them back, as if they mattered in his broken world.

Theresa jumped out of bed.

"I wish you'd tell me what you're doing out there in the cold. Is it time to get up?"

"No—yes. I've had an awful dream."

She could faintly distinguish his drawn features in the light near the window, and moved by a sudden anxiety she came over to him where he sat, and put her arms round his neck.

"Georgie . . . Georgie. What is it? Tell me."

He pushed her away.

"No, no . . . go . . . don't touch me. I'm a miserable sinner, who's been brought to judgment."

She gaped at him in surprise. The old George of Providence Chapel had been so long gone that she scarcely recognised him now. This was a stranger.

"What's happened? Oh, don't look at me like that —I can't bear it—" and throwing herself on her knees beside him once more she hugged him close.

He seemed to relax, then suddenly recovering he pushed her from him with such violence that she fell back on the floor. For a moment neither of them moved. They crouched, staring at each other in the light that was still half darkness. Theresa's face was set in its look of surprise and outrage, as if his violence had turned her to stone. George, on his chair, bowed forward on his knees, hating himself, and hating her, since, because of her, he hated himself.

"I'm a wretch that's not worthy to live or to die."

"You're mad. You frighten me."

"I'm no madder than I've been since yesterday morning—since I first met you, if it comes to that. You've bewitched me. You've tried to make me sell my soul for a mess of pottage, for bodily lusts. I should have been lost if the Lord hadn't brought me here."

"What *do* you mean?"

She scrambled suddenly to her feet.

"I mean that the Lord's been good to both of us, in showing us our evil ways: 'Repent ye and believe the Gospel.'"

She suddenly thought she understood him, and all her old tenderness came back, mixed with a new, strange compassion.

"Oh, Georgie—you haven't been frightening yourself with that old text? It's nothing to do with us."

He laughed bitterly.

"Who else has it got to do with? Two miserable sinners who came here for the express purpose of sinning against God."

"How can you say such a thing?"

"It's true."

"It isn't. We're not sinners. We're husband and wife—we're married. You yourself said so."

"I said it only to drown my conscience. We're not married according to the laws of the land or by the laws of the Gospel."

"We're married as the gipsies are——"

"What do I care about gipsies? They're godless, outcast folk living like cattle. You're a Christian woman and I'm a Preacher of the Gospel. Oh, my God! My God!"

She felt a thrill of fear go through her. This was something strange and terrible and outside her experience—something she could not understand. George's religion had always been a thing apart from their love. In the days of courtship it had influenced his beha-

viour—occasionally bringing her up against queer repressions and denials, that she had accepted because she loved him. Lately, there had been fewer of these, though he still sometimes talked about his ministry, and they had both made plans for its continuance when he left Kent. But never had she encountered his religion in this guise—as the dominant passion of his life, trampling and fouling their love, sweeping him away from her into strange paths where she could not follow, spurning and insulting her for all she had given him and wanted still to give.

"Oh, I don't understand," she cried miserably.

Then his manner changed, and he threw his arms round her, becoming in his turn tender and beseeching.

"Do understand," he begged her. "Oh, Terry, do understand what I feel—what's happened. It's God in his goodness who's given us a call to repentance, and woe betide us if we don't hear that call."

"I don't hear it."

"He brought us to this house——"

"He didn't. The woman from Flitterbanks sent us——"

"He spoke with her voice. Why couldn't she take us in? Why was her house full, and this, here, empty? Oh, Terry, don't you see the work of Providence?"

"No," said Theresa, in sullen anger. "I don't."

"I pray that your eyes may be opened. I pray that you may walk with me on the way of repentance. For

I still love you, Terry. Oh, my dear, don't think this means I don't love you any more."

"I don't know what it means. It's all beyond me. What I can't make out is that if we've been doing wrong all this time, you didn't know it earlier."

"I did know it, but I tell you my conscience was asleep. I tried to make myself believe that we were right in helping ourselves to what other folk wouldn't give us——"

"And weren't we?"

"You know we weren't."

"I don't know anything about it. It all seemed natural. I didn't think at all at the time, and afterwards you said we were married. . . ."

A fresh panic seized him in the face of her ignorance.

"O Lord! What a villain I am! What a mean, low-down villain—seducing an innocent thing like you. My dear—my little dear, I'm not fit to live."

"How dare you say such things!"

"It's all true. I'm filth. I'm scum. I've dragged you into this, and now I can't make amends."

"I don't want you to make amends."

"But you'll marry me, some day. Terry, swear you'll marry me. You haven't turned against me with all this?"

The dusk in the room had kindled, and in the waking light his wan face looked so pitiful that all her anger against him melted away.

"My poor Georgie, my poor old Georgie," and she

rocked his head against her bosom, "of course I'll never turn against you—and I'll always think myself your wife, whatever you may think——"

"But you'll marry me properly some day?"

"Yes, properly. I promise. And now do come back to bed. It's ever so cold, and we can't go away yet, for the people aren't up. . . ."

"You go back to bed. I'll sit here."

"But you're just as cold as I am."

"I'm not, and anyway it doesn't matter. Can't you understand?"

She realised that a wall had risen between them—a wall on which was written "Repent ye and believe the Gospel." From the further side of that wall his voice came beseeching, "Can't you understand?" She couldn't, but she wished she could. Shaken and miserable, she climbed back into bed, hiding her face deep in the pillows, while the daylight grew.

IV. *Theresa (lunar)*

I

A FEW DAYS LATER THE BENNETS RETURNED TO DELMONDEN. IT HAD BEEN, THEY TOLD EVERYONE, A most successful holiday, and also, they told each other, Theresa Silk had added substantially to the pleasure of it all. Contrary to expectations she had not been the slightest trouble. She had known so well how to amuse herself that her company had never once been a burden. Their only regret was that, unlike themselves, she did not seem to feel the benefit of the change. She looked fagged. Mrs. Bennet was inclined to blame Violet Clutter, for Theresa had come back dog-tired from that night she had spent at Henfield, and had said they had all been dancing after the dinner party, and had not gone to bed till nearly five o'clock in the morning. Mrs. Bennet had made her rest as much as possible all that day and the next, but she never seemed quite restored, and arrived back in Delmonden looking faded and unrefreshed.

The parish was now settling down for the winter. The last of the visitors had gone. The last of the harvest had been gathered in from the hop-gardens down by the Rother, and the blue smoke of the drying-furnaces had ceased to pour in sweetening gusts from

the oast-houses of Udiam and Kitchenhour. The fields lay brown and bare, their furrows veiled by the mists that clung no more to the river's course in a ribbon of haze, but stole inland, creeping into the woods and brooding over the fields. There was a queer choke of salt in them, telling of their birth at sea.

As Autumn had come to the countryside, so it had come to the church. Mrs. Bennet no longer found lupins and delphiniums to set in the altar vases, but brought chrysanthemums, picking them covered with frosty dew. In the still unwarmed church the dew clung to their petals, and when Mr. Bennet stood at the altar it rose to his nostrils in a ghost of scent, troubling him with thoughts of the Summer that was gone. St. Luke brought his little Summer to the woods, and, in his honour, the church wore crimson too. As at his going the fog thickened over the marshes and the floods drowned Wet Level under the raining sky, so the Cloud of Witness came into the church, and the tears fell of those who remember the dead.

By All Saints' tide, Mr. Bennet had once more become reconciled to his lot. Always on his return from his holiday he suffered from a kind of Brighton sickness. He could not help comparing Delmonden church with the churches he had visited while away—its humble struggles with their grand and glorious progress. For several days his brain had fluttered with mean tatters of envy—envy of their music, their ceremonial, their huge congregations, their women devout

even unto persecution, their choristers, their acolytes. Goaded by a sense of his shortcomings, he would fall every year upon some part of Delmonden's ecclesiastical anatomy and try to beat it into better shape.

This year he attacked the music. It really was disgraceful—anyway, it seemed so after the music at St. Bartholomew's. Hardly a Sunday passed without the organ cyphering, or the organist losing her place, or the choir losing their heads. Organ, organist, organ-blower, choir men, and choir boys were all so many separate centres of possible disruption. It was all quite shocking, and Mr. Bennet wrote admonishingly in the "Parish Magazine," arranged for extra choir-practices, collected a little money to buy some new music, and ordered the psalms to be monotoned till everybody had learned how to sing them.

Unfortunately these reforms were hampered by his total lack of any knowledge of music, and also by his inability to change his raw material. He could not afford a new organ, so he must make the best of the rheumy one he had; he was too kind-hearted to turn away Miss Bell, the organist, so he must put up with her lapses and collapses; the supply of small boys with tolerable voices was limited in Delmonden, so he must endure their occasional soarings into unlicensed cacophony. In the face of these obstacles his zeal flagged—as it always did every time he tried to rise above pagan levels. Just as last year he had decided that it was better to have no servers at all than louts who fell over

their own feet, broke his vessels, and tore his book, and in other years had tired of the thankless task of beating up congregations for daily services, harrying the towns for visiting preachers, badgering his parishioners with simplex and duplex systems of money-making, so now he decided that in this matter of music town standards were not for him to follow. Soon, all that remained of Delmonden's latest reformation was a new anthem, which at least every month made him regret his zeal.

2

Apart from these strifes and envyings, he was glad to be back in his parish. He had lived too long in the country to feel happy in a town for more than a few holiday weeks. Also, after his idleness—prolonged this year to twice its usual length—it was good to be at work again, visiting, teaching, holding services. Even the "tabioca-pudding" side of his ministry seemed worth while in those last weeks of Autumn.

Besides, there were, as always, those three who preferred the Bread of Life to tabioca pudding—his old folk, Mrs. Iggulsden and Mrs. Body and Davy Spong. In their society he could afford to forget the scrambling faithful of the Brighton churches. These three must be the final test of his ministry, just as it is age and not youth which is the final test of all religion. Religion is easy enough to youth, and conversely youth

seems to do very well without it. But in old age it is no longer easy to come by or easy to forego. When Mr. Bennet looked at his three old folk he saw in them his faith's proud vindication. Hope triumphed with faith, and love had trodden out all the way, till life and death were both things of exquisite simplicity. From their dim eyes, their young souls looked out at him, like birds eager for flight. . . . "They shall renew their youth, they shall mount up like eagles." . . . Meanwhile he could take comfort from them in the midst of his present anxieties, and courage for the days when he too should be very old.

But early that winter there was a change among them. Old Davy Spong died. He had gone in the morning as usual to work at Great Job's Cross, and that evening had turned in to bed after his usual supper of bacon and rice pudding. He had said, for the first time anyone remembered, that he felt a "liddle bit tired," and the next morning he was unable to get up. He lay in bed for eighteen days, and then passed away quietly in his sleep, his old heart running down like an unwound watch. Before he died, Mr. Bennet brought him the Sacrament, and said by his bedside some prayers they both loved and had often said together.

So now, he had only two left who preferred the Bread of Life. He must go on feeding these, in spite of the threats that were banking like clouds behind the cathedral towers of Maidstone. And, as a true pastor,

he must feed the others too—those who preferred tabioca pudding. He must see that they were given the best that could be had, that no one went hungry or neglected, or left this world with a sore heart because the shepherd of his soul had despised his poor body.

3

As the year went down into the solstice, both Mr. and Mrs. Bennet found that they were growing uneasy about Theresa. She had not recovered her old health and energy after that visit to Brighton. Of course it was only to be expected that she should take George Heasman's absence hard. But now she did not seem to have those queer lifts of spirit that had lightened her gloom during the first weeks of the separation. She appeared listless and indifferent when not actually depressed. She would never talk of George, turning the conversation fiercely from him, if ever in their concern for her the Bennets spoke his name.

"I'm afraid she feels we've taken her aunt's part against her," said Mrs. Bennet; "she seems to avoid us now, and when we do meet, she hardly talks at all."

"I don't see how she can blame us. We couldn't possibly have encouraged her to run off with Heasman, even if the law had allowed their marriage."

"But we've always spoken against the marriage—as if it would be a bad thing if it ever took place; and now I'm not quite sure that it would."

"And what's made you change your mind?"

"Nothing, except that I think the young fellow has behaved extremely well over the whole business. I confess I didn't like him much before it happened, but then I didn't know him at all."

"How much do you know him now?"

"Oh, not any better—except that he does seem to have behaved well, and that she does seem truly to love him."

"She's only a child."

"I know—and I never expected her to take it so hard; anyway, not to go on fretting like this. I thought that, at her age, she would get over it in a month or two. But she isn't getting over it at all. She looks positively ill—and all her old spirits are gone; she never larks about with the village people now."

"And a good thing, too."

"Yes, I know it is. But it's not natural—in her. And it's not natural of her to avoid us. She used to be always looking in at the Rectory, or running after me if she saw me in the lane . . . now she often merely bows like a grown-up person, and walks on. And we were all so jolly together at Brighton—I don't see how we can have offended her in any way."

"Perhaps we have. You never know."

"We ought to be able to know with her. She's not the sort to hide her feelings. I think I'll ask her to tea, and then we'll be able to tell if it's anything to do with us."

"Perhaps she won't come."

"I'll go on asking her till she does, or till we can be quite sure she wants to avoid us."

They asked Theresa once and she did not come. They asked her a second time, and she came, and it was easy enough to see that neither of the Bennets had offended her. She seemed glad enough to sit in the wintry sunshine by the study window, and eat Poor Emily's rather difficult cake, and talk about the weather and the robins on the lawn and the Christmas Tree at the Infants' Treat. She was only painfully anxious not to talk about George Heasman, and would even break into the stream of Mrs. Bennet's conversation if she thought that it was taking her that way.

"We've seen so little of you since we came back from Brighton. I'd rather hoped we might meet before this and talk over our little holiday. I always think it's such fun talking over good times when they're ended, almost as nice as having them—no, that's not true; of course one enjoys them more at the time. I particularly enjoyed our holiday this Summer. It was so delightful having you, dear, and thanks to your aunt's kindness we were able to be away just twice as long as usual. All I regret is that you got so tired just before we left. Really I oughtn't to have let——"

"What I liked so much at Brighton was those little paddle boats you work with your hands."

"Yes, I should think they were most enjoyable, though I've never ventured in one myself. But——"

Mrs. Bennet was determined to break down this strange barrier of secrecy that had risen between them, "I really have been a bit worried about you, dear. You've seemed to avoid us, and I've sometimes wondered if Mr. Bennet or I had done anything to offend you."

"Oh, no, of course you haven't."

"Then why won't you ever come and talk to us as you used to do—about . . ."

"I've not been feeling well."

The Rector's wife could not resist this false trail.

"You haven't looked it, child."

"No, I've had simply foul indigestion."

"Oh, dear!"

This seemed a prosaic explanation of Theresa's love-wan looks.

"Yes, I don't know what's happened to me. I never used to have it. I sometimes feel quite queer."

"Have you told your aunt? I expect she'd ask Dr. Gilpin to prescribe for you."

"I've told her a little, but I don't want her to get in a fuss about me. Her fusses are so dreary, and she'd try and make me go up to London when she goes next month, and I don't want to. I want to stay here."

"You'll be very lonely."

"Oh, no, I shan't. I don't mind being alone, but I hate London."

"Still, I think you ought to tell her if you feel ill."

"I'd much rather tell you, and you can advise me

what to take. I know you've got lots of stuff in a medicine cupboard."

Mrs. Bennet had. In the course of thirty-five years as a clergyman's wife, she had acquired a great many favourite cures for most ills. She could seldom resist administering these, and, tea being over, she and Theresa went forthwith to the inspection of her store, and discussed symptoms and remedies in a way certainly unusual to one of them. It was not till Theresa had gone, with a bottle and two packages in the pocket of her ulster, that Mrs. Bennet realised they had never spoken about George Heasman.

4

The Winter passed. The austere Spring of February came to the fields when Lent came to church—cold, rigid, yet hopeful, with long-drawn yellow sunsets and much rain. The Winter had not been eventful—it seldom was. There had been the usual Christmas treats and feasts, more modest than the Summer ones because more uncertain in their rivalry with the towns. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had, as usual, had their Christmas dinner with Dr. and Mrs. Gilpin, and had, as usual, said it was the best they had ever eaten. The serial story in "The Parish Sentinel" had come to an end, and Mrs. Bennet had seen with relief the total rout of the pro-celibacy party and her heroine firmly clasped to the bosom of a strapping curate. Mrs. Millington

had left Goldstrow for London soon after Christmas, and Theresa Silk had won her point and stayed behind. She came occasionally to meals at the Rectory, but otherwise the Bennets did not see much of her. She was on her bicycle again, scouring the country, though she no longer cared about queer people and often still looked miserable enough, poor child.

A winter event of more importance than any of the foregoing had been at last an appointment to the vacant see of Maidstone. It had stayed empty longer than is usual because of the general reluctance to undertake the responsibility of a large agricultural diocese that had been given its head by its late Bishop and ruled by simple processes of neglect. There had been some speculation among the clergy as to who would be the most likely to accept the undertaking—an easy-going scholar who wouldn't trouble about anything as long as he was left in peace, or a zealous pastor eager for hard work and reform. The Right Reverend Herbert Bacon belonged to the latter class, and of course Mr. Bennet prophesied the worst. In vain, other clergymen told him that it would be a distinct improvement to have a Bishop who had gained his pastoral experience as Rector of a parish rather than as Headmaster of a school. Mr. Bennet saw only that the parish was Evangelical, and therefore that the experience gained in it would be a curse rather than a blessing to parishes of a different type.

"What'll happen to me if he takes away my grant?

The diocese allows me two hundred pounds a year. If he takes it away I've got only a hundred and fifty to live upon."

"Why should he take away your grant?" asked the Rector of Witsunden, who had halted his motor-bicycle for a few minutes' chat over the news.

"He's sure to make conditions that I shan't be able to accept."

"I don't see why he should. You don't do anything very dangerous, do you?"

"I reserve the Blessed Sacrament for my sick communicants. I've done it for five years now, and I'm not going to stop."

"Well, I've done the same, and I don't intend to stop, either. But I don't expect him to ask me to. All he'll do will be to send out some printed regulations, that we can follow or not as we please."

"Oh, you young men!" wailed Mr. Bennet; "if only you'd lived in the old days you wouldn't be laughing now."

But even he was favourably impressed, when scarcely a week after the new Bishop's enthronement, he received a letter from him, written in the most kind and fatherly style, expressing nothing less than his wish to come and administer Confirmation at Delmonden. It was eighteen years since the church had been so honoured—for eighteen years Mr. Bennet had taken his candidates into the county boroughs of Maidstone or Ashford, or sometimes into the market towns of Goud-

hurst, Cranbrook, or Tenterden. A simple village church had been beneath the late Bishop's notice, but now it appeared that his successor was especially singling out the humble places that had hitherto been neglected. He wanted to know all his clergy, and the particular needs of each parish, however small and rural. Even Mr. Bennet's distrust flagged in the face of such fatherly zeal.

He now became all excitement for the event. There must be a brave show of candidates, and Delmonden must look its very best. Hitherto he had always been cautious in his approach of the unconfirmed—the view of confirmation as a social rite or as something done to please the Parson was to him a profanity, and he was always afraid of such motives influencing his flock. But now, he told himself, he might perhaps use a little more persuasion, since a good appearance would probably make a great difference to Delmonden's spiritual future. The Bishop could not fail to be impressed by a goodly number of candidates, and in the dazzle of their countenances might lose sight of those few trivial ornaments that troubled the legalities of Delmonden church.

Mrs. Bennet was also highly excited, and made preparations of a grosser kind. They must, she declared, entertain the Bishop at lunch. In fact, they ought really to ask one or two people to meet him—the Gilpins, Mrs. Millington, the Ingpens . . . she was afraid she could not manage more than that in view

of the tea there would have to be afterwards for the visiting incumbents and candidates.

"A luncheon party of eight! That'll be a big event for us. I don't think we've ever had so many before—Sunday supper, perhaps . . . and tea, of course . . . but never luncheon. As I tell people, I really don't entertain now. I've had to give up entertaining. People don't expect it since the war. I remember that in the old days I always considered it an important part of my duties as a clergyman's wife; though of course we were never rich. My dear, I shall never forget the first luncheon you took me out to after we were married. You were going to preach at Canon Wood-Saunders's church in Stockton, and I shall always remember how Mrs. Canon Wood-Saunders carved the fowl wearing a pair of grey kid gloves . . . it so impressed me. . . . It's a thing I would never dare do myself, I'm afraid."

"I don't suppose anyone would expect it—nowadays. And don't take too much upon yourself, my dear—are you sure you can manage as many as eight people?"

"Oh, of course I can. Mabel Breeds will help Poor Emily with the waiting, and eight is really easier than four—they entertain one another. I shall have some soup, and a couple of fowls, and the spring vegetables will be coming on nicely then . . . and a rhubard tart, or that nice dish with tinned apricots . . . perhaps we might have both . . . well, we'll see. And what about wine, dear?"

"Wine!" Her husband's anti-episcopal complex flared suddenly. "He won't drink wine. He's a Bishop, and all bishops are Manichees."

"We'll want some for the others. I don't suppose they're all Manichees."

"Well, I'm not, anyway. I'm a priest of the Holy Catholic Church, and don't indulge in ancient heresies or dare to correct my Lord and Master. . . . There'll be wine at my table, just as there was at Cana, and he can take it or leave it."

"Of course he can, dear, and we'll get something good. Mr. Boorman told me he had a special new lot of Australian burgundy—or was it South African? Anyway, I'll ask him to send round two bottles. And, Harry darling—don't you think the occasion warrants a new dress? Or a new jumper, anyway?"

"Oh, you women!"

Mr. Bennet beamed upon his wife, his momentary lapse into episcophobia forgotten in his delight at her feminine wiles. He saw her coquetry as something infinitely youthful and fascinating.

"Well, don't you think so?"

"Yes, perhaps I do. But don't ruin me with all this."

"Oh, no. I promise. I'll get it at Budgen's—I shan't go in to Bulverhythe."

"Well, no one could know that the clothes you buy at Budgen's don't come from Bulverhythe—or even from London."

And he really believed it.

Unfortunately for the smooth working of Mrs. Bennet's plans, Mrs. Millington came back towards the end of February, and seemed to think that the Bishop ought to have lunch at Goldstrow.

"My dear Mrs. Bennet, it's really too much of an undertaking for you to have him at the Rectory, and I'm sure he wouldn't expect it."

"But I'd like to have him. I'm looking forward to my party."

"Well, of course, you know, it's not too easy to entertain a Bishop. They're used to visiting in very elaborately appointed houses. Besides, I've just discovered that his sister, Elizabeth Bacon, married the brother of the Bishop of Glastonbury, who was a first cousin of my husband's. I really think he'll expect to be invited to Goldstrow."

"Can't you invite him to tea?"

"I think that's what *you'd* better do, Mrs. Bennet. I'll have him to luncheon and you'll have him to tea."

"But I can't have him to tea. There's always a big tea for the candidates in the Parish Room, and I have to supervise it."

Mrs. Bennet was determined not to give up her luncheon. At first the Rector had feared that she might surrender as part of her plan for placating Goldstrow. But she stood unexpectedly firm, and in the end managed to persuade Mrs. Millington to be content with a large tea party to which all of gentle rank in Delmonden would be invited "to meet the Bishop."

She herself sent out her invitations and everybody accepted them, even Mrs. Millington herself. There remained only to order the two plumpest chickens in Delmonden, the tenderest spring cabbage, and the most delicate young rhubarb—and two bottles of Australian burgundy, for the honour of Cana of Galilee.

5

When the day came, it was more successful on the worldly side than on the other-worldly. Mrs. Bennet's luncheon passed off without any embarrassment graver than Poor Emily's addressing everybody, male and female, as "My Lord," in consequence of too emphatic instructions with regard to the Bishop. Otherwise it was all worth the trouble it cost. The cooking justified the most frenzied struggles with the Rectory's fire-eating range, and Mabel Breeds, waiting at table, was brisk and efficient, if also rather loud in the breath and creaking in the shoe.

The Bishop certainly showed no hankerings after better things—indeed, when she remembered all that Mrs. Millington had said, Mrs. Bennet found him unexpectedly homely. He had two helpings of fowl, and a large one of each of the sweets, and drank three glasses of the lemonade which, without consulting her husband, she had provided in hospitable deference to his Manichaean aberrations. In fact, in view of what

he ate, it was surprising that he should be so thin, with a lean, rake-like body that rose nearly half a head taller than anyone else's at the table. His length seemed to be in his body rather than in his aproned, gaitered legs. He had a small head, curiously straight at the back—indeed, on close inspection, he was a mass of lesser physical peculiarities—a long nose, and a mouth that Mrs. Bennet longed to keep forever harmlessly occupied in receiving food. For when she saw it in repose, it was a fighter's mouth, large and grim, too much like her husband's for her to feel easy. His eyes were not like her husband's, for they bulged a little, and they never twinkled.

But on the whole she liked him. He was courteous and unassuming, and had a smile and a kind word for everybody. When Poor Emily helped him on with his greatcoat he asked her if she was coming to the service, and she replied:

"Oh, yes, my Lord; my little Arthur's going to be confirmed."

"Ah, indeed. Is that your son?"

"Yes, my Lord."

Mrs. Bennet trembled for Emily's ringless hand, but the Bishop was beaming too benevolently to notice it.

"Ah, indeed. And how old is he?"

For an anxious moment the Rector feared that Poor Emily would create an ecclesiastical dilemma by putting little Arthur below the official confirmation age,

but she fortunately answered "Twelve and a half, my Lord," though he had been nine only a week ago.

6

Delmonden vestry was full of squirming little boys, who looked as if they were engaged in a pillow fight, so desperately did they struggle with their newly starched surplices. Mr. Bennet felt that he had committed a blunder. He should have given the Bishop a room at the Rectory to vest in, and then have driven him to church in all the magpie splendour of his episcopal motley. It was so long since a Bishop had visited Delmonden that he had forgotten that probably his father-in-God was not used to scrambling into his robes in the midst of a riot. The Rector did it Sunday after Sunday, so that by this time he scarcely noticed his own difficulties; but a Bishop was probably used to more decorous surroundings. . . . Mr. Bennet ordered the whole choir out into the churchyard, and so abashed were they at the sight of a live Bishop that they obeyed him.

The Rector of Witsunden was there to officiate as Bishop's chaplain, and carry his big crozier before him into the chancel. There were, besides, seven or eight visiting clergymen, bringing about twenty-five candidates between them; so Delmonden church was full as it had seldom been in the course of its history. Mr. Bennet felt a definite thrill of pride as he looked down

from the chancel into the sunny nave, and saw all the white veils of the girls and the shiny heads of the boys. Fourteen of them were Delmonden boys and girls, more than half the number brought by all the other parishes together. It was wrong, he supposed, to gloat, but he had had so few opportunities for gloating that he felt a kindly Providence might forgive him now. The organ began to play the hymn "My God accept my heart this day," and the choir to sing "Come, Holy Ghost, Creator Blest," and the Rector's gloating came to its usual end.

Nothing happened to restore it. The Bishop gave two addresses of highly disturbing quality. They were both dogmatic—the dogma being for the most part an exact contradiction of that in which Mr. Bennet had carefully instructed his candidates. All the Rector's distrust of him revived—"negative and fanatical—as bad as anything we ever had up North. Why couldn't he just tell the children to be good? I've done all the teaching that's necessary; all he's got to do is to put the fear of God into 'em; instead of which he's putting doubts of their parson. I hope to goodness they're not listening."

Mrs. Bennet was not listening. Her head was far too full of the past luncheon and the coming tea. As a result, she enjoyed the service very much indeed. The March sunshine in the church, the children, and the singing all stirred her heart with a deep and thankful

joy. She was sorry when the last of the recessional hymn died away, and the choir, the clergy, and the Bishop were all struggling together in the vestry.

Her part was now to shepherd the candidates to the Parish Room where tea awaited them. It had been laid earlier in the day, and during the last hymn Mrs. Gasson and Mrs. Boorman and Mrs. Apps had slipped out to boil the kettles. Mrs. Bennet waited only to say good-bye to the Bishop, who was now to be swept away in Mrs. Millington's car to Goldstrow. He came at last, followed by his ruffled host. Mrs. Millington immediately pounced upon him.

"My dear Bishop, how tired you must be! My car's ready, and you must come at once to Goldstrow for a rest, and to meet some delightful people who——"

Mr. Bennet was so annoyed with things in general that he forgot his tactics with Goldstrow and interrupted her——

"I hope, my Lord, you have time to shake hands with one or two of my parishioners, who have been waiting here in hopes of meeting you."

"Certainly, certainly—I'm not tired in the least. Your parishioners have first claim on me, Mr. Bennet."

The Rector's anger melted at this sign of grace, and he brought forward his dear Mrs. Body, dressed in her neat Sunday bonnet and cape, and smiling at the Bishop with her tired, sweet blue eyes, which were full of the mysticism of the earth.

"I'm honoured, Sir," she said as she shook hands; "we're all honoured by this kind visit."

"You should address the Bishop as 'my Lord,'" Mrs. Millington admonished her.

Mrs. Body looked confused, and the grasses in her bonnet trembled a little, but she was too shy to say anything. The Rector could have smitten Mrs. Millington to the ground.

"I think all this ought to have been done in the vestry," remarked that lady as Mr. Apps and Mr. Boorman were led up.

"You can't do anything in the vestry," Mrs. Bennet tried nervously to soothe her. "We really ought to have another, but I don't know where the money's to come from. Our church has many shortcomings, but they're nearly all due to want of money. . . . There, now, I think the Bishop's ready. How kind he is! I'm so sorry you've been kept waiting, but these old people would have been terribly disappointed if he hadn't spoken to them."

Evidently the Bishop had given satisfaction all round, for everybody looked pleased, even Mr. Bennet. Mrs. Millington was now no longer to be cheated of her prey. She snatched him and swooped him into her car with such rapidity that the suitcase containing his episcopal gear was nearly left behind. He drove off bowing and smiling and rubbing his hands, and the villagers cheered desultorily, and Mrs. Bennet called, unnoticed, "Give my love to Theresa." She was sorry

the child had not come to the confirmation. It would have been sure to have done her good.

7

When Mrs. Bennet had left for the Parish Room, in the midst of her white-veiled candidates like a flock of doves, the Rector set out for home, where nearly a dozen hungry clergymen awaited him. It had been thought considerate to feed them apart from their flocks, with whom they would soon have to journey, in crowded proximity, back to Trillinghurst, Witsunden, Haffenden, Boldshaves, and other places they came from. Poor Emily and Mabel Breeds had charge of the Rectory tea, which was served in the big, sun-eaten drawing room, every armchair of which contained a weary shepherd, worn out with the effort of transporting bodies for long distances in the interests of their souls.

"Never mind," said Witsunden, cheerily, "perhaps it'll be our turn next year, and you'll have to come to us."

"I must say," said an old and surly Parson from Ramstile, "that it's not very considerate of the Bishop to have chosen a parish right on the edge of the diocese. Somewhere more central would have been better appreciated."

"I think he's following the plan of going to those places most neglected by his predecessor—and Delmon-

den hasn't had an Episcopal visit for about twenty years; isn't that so, Bennet?"

"I hope he keeps away for another twenty years," grumbled the Rector of Delmonden.

"Really! You're very ungrateful. I wish he'd come to me; it 'ud give us no end of a leg-up."

"Considering he as good as told my candidates that everything I'd been teaching them was lies . . ."

"My dear man, what does that matter? Any well-instructed candidate knows he or she mustn't believe a word the Bishop says. I told mine they were not to, under any circumstances, unless they asked me first."

"You think it helps forward the faith in this country if our young folk grow up distrusting their Bishops?"

"Well, we distrust them, don't we? And the young folk see that we do, so it's best to be honest."

"I don't agree with you," said Mr. Bennet, rather angrily; "I'm all for safeguarding the ideals of youth. None of my children know that I distrust my Bishop."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that. They'll probably find out some day, and then they may distrust you too. I'm all for facing the facts. And may I point out that I've never had a row with a Bishop in my life, and don't intend to have one—in fact I'll bet you I won't, and I'll bet you I won't keep out of it by giving way to him, either."

"I've had dozens of rows," said Mr. Bennet, with a struggle of pride in his voice—"in the past, that's to

say. It's been perfect peace down here, till now, of course, when it's all going to start over again."

"Ideals must be more quarrelsome things than facts," laughed Witsunden.

Mr. Bennet glared at him, and moved his chair nearer Boldshaves, who, being a pious, old-fashioned Evangelical, was a little bewildered by the conversation.

The clergy of South-West Kent in Mr. Bennet's drawing room must have represented between them quite half a dozen varieties of the Anglican religion. At Trillinghurst and Witsunden, hopeful young men refused to surrender to the religion of the villages and filled their churches with broken gleams of a wider faith. The majority of the visiting candidates were theirs. At Heartsap a fine old scholar dozed among his books during the week, and on Sundays put his congregation to sleep with his efforts to talk to them in their own language. At Bettenham a hearty, pig-judging Squarson administered the Parish in good old Hanoverian style. At Boldshaves, the best of Victorian piety comforted the old folk and outraged the young. At Haffenden a wild-man-of-the-woods lived in a thicketed Rectory beside a church locked like a cupboard—and the cupboard was bare. The rest were just rather vague, honest, disappointed men, rooted in the villages so long that they had forgotten the world which had forgotten them.

They all had one point in common, except Betten-

ham, and that was poverty. Their united incomes would not have come to much more than two thousand a year. The cruel sun, licking the last colours out of the carpet, cynically exposed their worn suits and cassocks, frayed cuffs, celluloid collars, and patched shoes. It also mocked their poverty in another way by showing them up as an exceedingly healthy set of men. Even Trillinghurst, who had come into the country threatened with consumption, looked stout and rosy. Evidently plain living, combined in most cases with the plainest thinking, had had no ill effect upon them. Their faces were the brown and red, weathered faces of labouring men, and in their eyes was sometimes a clear, distant look, which the earth puts into the eyes of labouring men. But for their black clothes and perverted collars they might have been a set of farmers gathered together incongruously in a drawing-room for afternoon tea.

As Mr. Bennet sat by the tea tray, fragments of their conversation reached him from different parts of the room.

"Yes, that's always the way. Queen Anne's Bounty takes two and a half per cent, and then keeps you waiting for your money. I used to get my tithe from only two farms, and they both paid on the nail—two twopenny stamps for the receipt, that was all it cost me." . . . "I can't get them to come. They don't seem interested. It's not like it was when we first came. People don't care. It's the pull of the towns, I sup-

pose. None of the young ones seem to care about religion at all." . . . "I'm trying Jerseys now. Wonderful milk, and I can sell it twice as easily as I did when I had the Sussex. I don't think they're so delicate as people make out, and I've built a new place for them." "Yes, we had eighty at the Sung Mass, not counting the children. I'm ordering some simple music from the Faith Press. I want 'em all to sing." "My wife can't do much in the garden now, and I find it rather difficult to manage without her. She never really got over that fall, you know. Perhaps we ought to move into a more accessible place, but it's so difficult to hear of anything. One reads a lot about the shortage of clergy, but when it comes to getting a decent living. . . ." "Mere nonsense and waste of time. They're just a pack of poachers—the same now as when I first went there." "Have you ever tried King Edwards?" . . . "Solemnity of St. Joseph" . . . "New edition of Hymns Ancient and Modern" . . . "My Church Council won't" . . . "Trying to get a kitchen range out of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners" . . .

It all buzzed round him, so that he was almost asleep, and it was half in a dream that he seemed to see the face of Theresa Silk close to the window.

"Hullo!"

He started up, and at the same moment the face withdrew. He wondered if he had really dreamed it; then he saw her again, full length in her old ulster, pushing her bicycle down the drive. He tapped at

the window, and beckoned, but she only shook her head at him. Why had she come? What had frightened her away? Doubtless the clergy of South-West Kent. She must have expected to find him and Mrs. Bennet alone, and he had a vague, uneasy sense of personal failure as he watched her go.

8

Theresa pushed her bicycle as far as the lane, then mounted and rode off, turning right at the high road and pedalling towards Four Throws. She had no very clear idea of where she wanted to go. All places were fog-bound, dim, and unreal on the edge of her thought —that land of sorrow which was so pitilessly clear. The only thing she knew was that she did not want to be at Goldstrow, where her aunt and the aristocracy of Delmonden serenaded the Bishop with clinking teacups. She had not heard, or had forgotten, about the tea in the Parish Room, and had expected to find Mr. and Mrs. Bennet alone together at the Rectory. She had looked in at the window and all she had seen had been a lot of odd-looking clergymen. Their faces in her memory had something of the quality of a nightmare—ordinary and yet terrifying; because they had shown her that once again she must put back her trouble into her heart and bear it alone.

She was already beginning to feel that she didn't want to talk to anyone about it. That was how she

usually felt—sad and secret. But moments sometimes came when her whole body trembled to tell—or rather, to ask. For part of the bitterness of her trouble lay in that it was half a question. She did not know. For about the first time in her life she longed for motherly arms round her, and a motherly heart which would answer her questions tenderly, soothingly, and negatively—"No, no, dear, it's all right. You've made a mistake. Don't worry any more. I know all about these things, so you can trust me."

She felt that Mrs. Bennet would say all this. There was no one but Mrs. Bennet. Her aunt—she turned her mind with a shudder from any thought of confiding in her aunt, though Mrs. Millington's bosom, if rather hard, was motherly in outline. Violet—no; she hated Violet's ideas, and Violet could not comfort her—she could only help her hide. George—so far away from her in body, so frighteningly near in the contacts of his soul—she could not tell him, for one does not tell these things to souls, only to bodies. His body was a stranger, living an unknown, unimaginable life far away. She forgot that it had ever been so close, so dear. They did not belong to each other any more—they were separated, linked only occasionally by letters in which he poured out his soul to her—that other stranger, his soul, whom she had been afraid to meet, but was now compelled to know. She could only answer, "I love you—I love you," scrawling over the

page in a big hand that soon had filled it with foolish, inadequate words.

She had passed Four Throws, and was free-wheeling down the little lane that leads by Foxhole and Scullsgate to the hamlets at the back of Benenden, where little red roofs scatter in the green of the Kentish hill. She felt suddenly and horribly tired. Through the valley a little stream flowed, and, propping her bicycle against the hedge, she climbed over a gate, and sat down beside it. It moved over its stony bed with a shallow, tinkling music, and at first the sound of it filled all her thoughts, sending them to sleep. She stretched herself full length in the damp grass by the water side, and for a moment everything seemed to slip away. . . .

Was she fainting? Her heart beat wildly, and she clutched at it. This was something new. She had grown used to the fatigue that rushed suddenly upon her and overwhelmed her, that had in it a dreadful quality both of heaviness and of restlessness. She had grown used to the nausea, to the inexplicable moments of terror. . . . But as soon as she grew used to one feeling of distress, it changed, or another succeeded it. Oh, what was happening to her? But she no longer wanted to ask. She only repeated over and over again to herself, "It can't be true—it can't be true."

She wished now that she had interested herself more in the things that interested other girls. Violet Clutter would never find herself in a state like this. But then

she had not cared for Violet Clutter when she was at school, she had always despised her and those girls who talked like her, about clothes and men; she had taken very little notice of her till the time came when she had a man of her own, and then she had found her useful. Other girls she knew, even at school, had been interested in the way babies came, and had even been told by their mothers about it. She had never cared two straws about these things—she had never wanted to ask or know about them—she had been much more interested in the way you made a water-mill in the carpenter's shop, and all about the thieves' kitchen in *Oliver Twist,* and how one could possibly manage to learn thieves' Latin. . . . These things had absorbed her and sustained her till she met George, who had taken her out of the queer world she loved, into another world where she was an ignorant stranger. She would not have minded so much if he had been near her, but he was so terribly far away. They had said good-bye at the gate of the new world, and he had gone on his way and she on hers, and it seemed as if they would never meet again.

She had his ring—her wedding ring, as she still called it, gazing at it now and then forlornly, and trying in vain to recover the moment when he had first put it on her finger, kissing her clenched hand as they stood in the fog and darkness outside the farm at Botolphs. But she could not wear it, either on her hand or as a locket, for she dare not let it be seen.

She did not really mind—for it meant very little to her now. It did not even seem now to look like a wedding ring—so thick and big and obviously not golden . . . not real . . . well, of course it wasn't real, just as her wedding had not been real. She sometimes asked herself if her love had ever been real, for now it often seemed very like a dream. . . .

George's last letter crackled in the pocket of her ulster, and she pulled it out to read it, that she might feel him nearer. His letters always surprised her, for they were so long and full of words. In them he put all the energy of self-expression that he used once to put into his preaching. For he preached no longer now; he had withdrawn his application to the Calvinistic Methodist Council, and occupied himself entirely with selling tea. Theresa was sorry, because she knew that he suffered, and that she was the cause of his suffering, just as he was the cause of hers. He too had been driven out of the world he loved, he too was a lonely stranger in a new and terrifying world.

Should she write to him about her fears, as he wrote to her about his? When he wrote, as he wrote in this letter—"Oh, Terry, sometimes I fear I've sinned past God's forgiveness, for I've sinned against you, you innocent thing, and the light that God has given me as the preacher of his Gospel"—should she write: "Oh, George, I fear I'm going to have a baby. I've felt so ill all this winter, but I don't know anything about these things, and I'm afraid to ask anyone."? No, of

course she couldn't. If she could not bring herself to speak it, she certainly could not write it. He must go on pouring out his terrors and troubles to her, and she must say nothing about hers to him—must not because she could not.

Yet perhaps she ought to. If she was going to have a child, they ought to be married before it came. But how were they to be married? Would Aunt Eleanor relent if she knew what depended on it, or would she be angrier than ever? And suppose it wasn't true?—suppose she gave herself and George away and there was nothing in it? That was why she wanted to see Mrs. Bennet—who would tell her without judgment. Mrs. Bennet would be terribly shocked and upset, of course, but she would not be angry, and perhaps she would say that it was not true. "Oh!" cried Theresa, sitting up suddenly in the damp, green grass—"it can't—it can't be true."

9

The March sky hung lower over the fields, grey and filling itself with rain. As it filled and darkened, the earth also became dark and terribly clear. The hills of Kent were no longer a lambent green; the green passed into the light, leaving them leaden grey, with iron-black woods and hedges. Farms many miles away came nearer and the spaces between earth and sky seemed to dwindle, as if the land lifted herself

thirstily to the rain. The first drops fell, and Theresa scarcely noticed them as they spattered round her; then as the drops became rods and a low hiss rose from the grass, she lifted herself wearily. She did not mind getting wet, but if she came home wet through, her aunt would fuss, and Theresa, who had always hated fuss, now feared it; for she knew that it would mean questions and interference, and perhaps a sudden slip of her goaded tongue.

Anyhow, if she caught cold she would have to see the doctor. Her aunt had already threatened her with him once. Her aunt had been shocked when she came back from London to find her looking so ill and run down. . . . As she sat huddled in the rain, too listless and weary to fulfil her purpose of getting to her feet, she suddenly wondered for the first time if all the village knew about her trouble. Village people saw everything, guessed everything—so Mr. Bennet said. Were they gossiping about her? Did they know more about her than she knew about herself? Had they already answered her dreadful question?

A new fear came down on her—the fear of the herd. She saw everybody looking at her, pointing at her, whispering about her. She heard them judging, jeering, shouting. . . . Oh, no doubt she was wicked—she had done what nobody ever could forgive. She had done the same as that girl Susan Lamb, whom her aunt had made such a hell about nearly a year ago. She hadn't been supposed to know anything at the time,

and she hadn't known much, because at the time she hadn't cared about those things; they hadn't interested her. Now she wished that they had interested her more.

Vague fragments of classics, read at school without much understanding, now came into her mind terribly explained. Hetty Sorrel . . . that was a girl in a book, who had had a child without being married, and had killed it because of the shame. Would she, Theresa, want to kill her child? She had no pleasure in the thought of its coming, such a pleasure as flowers redeemingly in many terrified and broken hearts. Her passion for George had wakened her into a woman, but a woman who had nothing of the mother about her. She did not even feel motherly towards George —only plaintively loving and scared, and lost. She had never wanted a child, she did not want one now; she knew nothing about children, and cared nothing. Oh, why had life done this? For the first time a protest against the way of things formed itself in her heart. She felt betrayed—by life rather than by man. She had not asked for love, and when she had loved she had not asked for anything more than each moment as it passed. But she had been brought under the yoke she had never imagined and had to face the future she had never thought of—could not think of now.

At last she was on her feet, so tired that the prospect of the ride home made the tears come into her eyes. They rolled down her cheeks as she walked over the

field towards the lane. Her bicycle lay propped against the bank. She mounted it after two failures, and immediately fell off it, as her whole body was contracted with a sudden, dreadful pain.

She had never felt anything like it before, and the sweat stood out on her forehead, and her teeth began to chatter. What was she to do? What could she do —if it came back? She waited, sweating and shaking, and then as the minutes passed and it did not return, she ventured on a step forward. Slowly, pushing her bicycle and leaning heavily on saddle and handle bar, she walked along the level lane to where Scullsgate hill rose steeply into rain-smothered woods. The hill looked topless, a Sinai reaching into the clouds, and she would have to push her bicycle up—up till the clouds were reached. Oh, why had she been such a fool and come so far!

Wheels rumbled in the lane, and looking round she saw a big farm waggon come slowly towards her behind a string of bay horses. She would ask for a lift. Even if it went no farther than Four Throws, she would be spared that dreadful hill. The relief was almost comfort.

Two men were sitting up in front of it, an old man and a young one. "Jump in," they said to Theresa, when she asked them if they would let her ride as far as Four Throws. But they did not offer to help her lift in her bicycle, till they saw that she was quite in-

capable of doing it herself. Then the young one climbed down and helped her. He looked at her in a way that made her want to hide herself, though his eyes were kind and stupid.

"Tired, äunt you, Miss?"

"A little bit."

"Far to go?"

"Delmonden."

"We turn off at the Throws—we're from Owley Farm, beyond Wittersham. But maybe at the Throws you'll find a car that'll täake you the rest of the way."

"Hurry up, Fred," said the old man sitting in front, and Fred hurried, leaving Theresa stretched out beside her bicycle among the empty sacks on the waggon floor. He had left her only just in time, for she could feel the pain coming back . . . the next minute it had seized her, wrenched her . . . she swallowed down her cries and it passed. But worse than any pain was the fright that held her now. Oh, what was happening to her? It could not be that her child was going to be born. She knew enough about these things to realise that it was much too early for that. The eternity that divided her from George was scarcely six months long. She must be very ill—enduring something altogether strange and abnormal even for her strange and abnormal state. Oh, why hadn't she been able to see Mrs. Bennet? . . . Yet what could Mrs. Bennet have done for her? She couldn't have told her that nothing was

wrong. She could only have stopped her coming all the way out here like the fool she was. . . .

Perhaps she was going to die—here in this farm cart. The thought of death made her tremble, but at the moment it seemed scarcely more of a terrifying mystery than birth. Nevertheless, she did not want to die. She had enjoyed her life up to less than a year ago—oh, the fun it had been!—the explorations, the adventures, the secrets, the merry lies. . . . All that queer, lonely, boy's life that she had lived—she could hardly bear to think of it now. The last few months had been hell, but she did not want to die. She wanted to wake from this nightmare and live her free boy's life again.

The waggon rumbled on up the hill. The driver and the young man seemed to have forgotten all about her. She could hear their voices drawling on and on . . . they were talking about a prize-fight. A year ago their talk would have thrilled her, but now it came down as mere words. "He's a valiant chap, our Curley —a gurt lad" . . . "Reckon he could have täaken on two more sträangers" . . . "Wur you there that time he knocked out the Prancer over at Appledore?"

The rain was still falling fast. She pulled some of the sacks over her, cowering beneath them. Her limbs were shaking, her brave red hair was limp and draggled on her forehead. Those streaming rays of a mediaeval sun were now nothing more than the tangled locks of a suffering woman. She held her hands over her mouth to stifle the groans that would

come when the waggon jolted. . . . So on, and on, and on, and on up the hill. . . . "What was the purse at Benenden?" . . . "I never saw better foot-work in my days, no, not in any ring."

10

Mrs. Bennet was saying good-bye to her candidates at the Rectory, where they had all come back with her after tea to receive each one a sixpenny prayer-book as her confirmation gift. Their veils discarded, they no longer looked like a flock of doves, but ordinary, pudding-faced young girls and women, who giggled and whispered to each other while she talked to them. The boys had assembled with Mr. Bennet for a similar purpose in his study. The Rectory had never been so full of young life—youth made a little awkward and self-conscious by a great occasion, but with the solemnity beginning to wear off and releasing surreptitious kicks and punches among the boys and giggles among the girls.

"It's been a wonderful day, girls—the most wonderful day you've, any of you, ever had. It's been a wonderful day for me, though it's nearly fifty years since I was confirmed. Bishop Wilkinson prepared me, you know, when he was Vicar of St. Peter's, Eaton Square, and it was the happiest day of my life. At least, not quite"—even in the cause of edification Mrs. Bennet felt she had better be truthful—"not quite, but very

nearly. In those days it was considered worldly to wear a white dress, so I wore a grey one—and we had caps instead of veils . . . frilly caps. . . . But that isn't what I want to talk to you about. You'll use those prayer-books, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, Ma'am."

"I mean you won't just keep them in the parlour."

"Oh, no, Ma'am——"

"Please, Ma'am, there's a car coming up the drive."

"Never mind, Lily—it's nothing to do with us here."

But she could not resist craning forward just to see whose it was as it passed the window. They were all crowded together in Mrs. Bennet's little work-room, so they had not that fine prospect of the drive and lawn that the drawing-room windows gave. The car was only an ordinary small tourer with the hood up.

"I expect it's someone for the Rector. . . . Now, girls——"

But the next minute Poor Emily put her head in at the door:

"Please, Ma'am, you're wanted."

"Who is it, Emily? You know I'm engaged."

"It's two young ladies brought Miss Silk, Ma'am, and please come, Ma'am, for I'm frightened."

Mrs. Bennet suddenly felt cold. Emily's words conveyed nothing to her beyond a general sense of unusualness in Theresa's arrival, and her manner was not specially ominous, for she was given to being frightened on many quite normal occasions. But the whole

effect was one of strangeness and fear. She suddenly wished these grinning, giggling girls out of the house. All she said was:

"Now please keep quiet, dears, till I come back."

Then she followed Emily out into the hall, quite uncertain of what she was going to see. She saw two unknown young women standing on either side of the hall seat, on which, between them, she had a glimpse of a familiar old brown ulster, at the first glance carelessly flung down, at the second, seen with dismay to contain the collapsed body of Theresa Silk.

"My dear child——"

She hurried forward, and the two young women both began to speak at once.

"Two men in a cart stopped us and asked if we'd give her a lift into Delmonden. They said——" "She asked us to bring her to Delmonden Rectory, so we——" "I'm afraid she's rather bad, and of course we couldn't help jolting on these——" "I think she must have appendicitis. I know something about——" "Would you like us to fetch a doctor? I asked her if——"

Mrs. Bennet took scarcely any notice of them. She bent over Theresa, and lifted away the dank hair that had fallen across her face.

Under the hair, Theresa's eyes were staring—frantic and forlorn, through the Rector's wife into some abyss beyond her. She suddenly put out her hand and seized Mrs. Bennet's, twisting it in a grip of despair.

"Let me stay here—don't send me away."

"My dear, tell me what's happened. Have you had an accident?"

"I'm nearly sure she has appendicitis," one of the young women began again. "My sister had it only last year, so I think I know the symptoms."

"Don't send me back to Goldstrow," wailed Theresa.

"But, dearie, I really think you ought to go home if you're feeling so ill. You'll have your own nice comfortable bedroom, you know—and perhaps these ladies will be so kind as to fetch Dr. Gilpin."

"I don't want him. I won't see him. I want you—I want to talk to you. Send those awful girls away and let me talk to you."

She struggled up into a sitting position, and Mrs. Bennet suddenly became autocratic.

"Help me get her on the sofa in the next room," she commanded.

With an effort they managed to lift Theresa, till she stood sagging between them from her arms, which hooked over their shoulders.

"Emily, help me carry her legs."

But Emily was far too scared. She could only stand far back in the shadows of the hall, twisting her apron, and muttering to herself about "a sad accident—a lamentable accident—my liddle Arthur saw it up at the Throws, and there was a young boy killed—a young, beautiful boy."

Mrs. Bennet told her to fetch her master, and then,

somehow, the three of them dragged Theresa into the drawing-room, as far as the sofa, where she once more became, as it were, a mere part of her old brown ulster, flung down upon the seat.

"Don't leave me—don't send me away."

"Of course I won't leave you, dear."

"But promise not to send me away—send those awful women away. I want to speak to you."

Mrs. Bennet whispered hoarsely in the ear of the more intelligent looking of the girls, to fetch Dr. Gilpin—"they'll tell you in the village where he lives . . . and thank you so much for bringing her—you mustn't mind what she says. She's not herself—but please, please go at once."

They clumped out of the room, and Mrs. Bennet returned to the sofa. As she looked down at Theresa, she felt utterly bewildered. Everything had happened so suddenly and confusingly. She had not had a moment to think. Now she wondered if the girl was unconscious—she lay so limply, like a poor rag-doll . . . then once again that hot, twitching hand shot out and seized hers.

"Mrs. Bennet—help me. Help me. I want you to tell me something."

II

Mr. Bennet was enjoying himself over his last injunctions to the little boys. He often enjoyed admonition

of this sort, and was not unduly exacting in his demands for attention. The study was comfortably noisy, what with the Rector's slow, booming voice, and the scrappings and scufflings and whisperings of six little youths, who were already beginning to produce surreptitious marbles. That is why the noise of Theresa's arrival seemed to him nothing more than a quite ordinary noise, and he was terribly surprised when Poor Emily suddenly burst open the door, crying:

"There's been an accident, Sir, a tur'ble accident. Miss Theresa Silk's been run over by a motoring car. My liddle Arthur saw it up at the Throws—a car and a farm-cart from Owley—and a beautiful boy killed."

"What-what-what-what?" stuttered Mr. Bennet.

"An accident, Sir," cheerfully cried all the little boys.

"Where is it? Where is she? Have they sent for me, Emily?"

"They've brought her in here, Sir—brought her here to die. The mistress has got her in the drawing-room, and she said to me, 'Fetch your Master, Emily, for there'll be work for him as well as for me tonight.'"

Mr. Bennet turned round on the boys.

"Go home at once—go home, all of you, and go quietly. Emily will show you out the back way."

Then he hurried into the hall, and across it to the drawing-room, but as he pushed open the door a voice he hardly recognised as Lucy's shouted: "Don't come in!"

It sounded harsh and fierce, as he had only once

heard her voice sound before—when their little girl was dying. Somehow the ring of it made him afraid as Emily's words had not, and he stood for a moment with his hand on the door, silent and listening to a thin voice, within, that rose and fell almost like a cry.

As he stood there he noticed a movement at the far end of the hall. The girls in Mrs. Bennet's work-room had heard more of the matter than he, and now they were beginning to come out one by one, standing in the shadows at the back of the hall, where Emily had stood.

"Are we to stay, Mr. Bennet? Mrs. Bennet said we were to wait till she came back, but she's bin gone a terrible long while."

"You'd better go home. Don't wait any longer. I've sent away the boys."

"May we be told what's happened, Sir?"

"There's been an accident. Miss Theresa Silk has had an accident."

They fluttered away. The grey and white mass that had been their frocks and faces, faded off into the back parts of the house, leaving only shadows which crept nearer to him across the hall.

12

The news of the accident spread all over the village, being brought to cottages and farms by scared young folk clasping sixpenny prayer-books. Poor Emily up

at the Parsonage had said Miss Theresa Silk was dying —not that her word went for anything much, but you couldn't quite disbelieve her, neither, for sometimes she queered you by saying a thing with no reason at all and then being right.

Dr. Gilpin, pursued from Lossenham to Reedbed and then to Moon's Green by the two alarmed and slightly offended young women, heard a different story. He hurried at once to the Rectory, which seemed to be in darkness. There was no light either upstairs or down, though as he passed the drawing-room he saw that the windows were still unblinded, giving the place that peculiarly forsaken air of a house that is neither shut nor lighted. He rang the bell, half wondering if he hadn't been misdirected—after all, it seemed odd that Theresa Silk should have been taken to the Rectory and not to Goldstrow. But the door was opened almost at once by Mr. Bennet.

He had been standing in the hall ever since the children had left, listening to the thin, wordless voice that came from the drawing-room, and with a growing sense of helplessness and horror to the moans that sometimes strung themselves like beads upon its thread. The night had crept into the house, and still he had waited. Once or twice he had moved to go away, but had been held back by the thought that his wife might need him, or that the doctor might come and find no one to let him in, as it was impossible to tell what Poor Emily was doing in her present state.

Once he had knocked on the door and said, "I'm here, Lucy," and she had answered, "Thank you, dear— don't come in." He thought perhaps it helped her to know he was outside.

She would not even let him in when the doctor came. But she asked him to bring the lamp, and the darkness of the house was slashed with a slant of orange light, moving down the scullery passage and across the hall, to light up the clumps of furniture in the drawing-room and send their long shadows moving over the carpet. The shadows retreated before him across the room, as he carried the lamp to a little table beside the sofa, and out of them at last came Theresa, lying as if flung on its hard, tapestried seat, her eyes staring at him in a way that was new, her face no longer looking like her own, so old was it, and shocked and wrung.

His hands trembled as he set down the lamp.

He heard Dr. Gilpin say:

"We must get her to bed at once."

His wife answered:

"Yes. I'll go and find Emily, and we'll have the spare room ready in a few minutes. Harry will help you carry her up."

"Oh, please don't leave me!" wailed Theresa.

Her new voice sounded familiar, because it was the thin sound he had listened to for so long. She caught Mrs. Bennet's hand as she tried to move away, and her face twisted suddenly.

"Oh, please don't leave me! It's coming back. I know it's coming back. Oh, please don't leave me."

"Harry—you go," said Mrs. Bennet, "find Emily and tell her to get the spare room ready—quickly, quickly, quickly!"

She too was speaking with a new voice, and of her, too, he felt a little frightened. He hurried away, and luckily found Poor Emily no farther off than the kitchen—sitting by the fire and singing a hymn under her breath:

> Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes,
> Shine through the gloom and waft me to the skies . . .

The dirge-like croon suddenly stirred up Mr. Bennet into anger, and he ordered her pretty roughly about her business.

"Don't sit yowling there, Emily—your mistress wants the spare room got ready at once. Run upstairs and make yourself useful."

"I'm frightened," said Emily, but she was obedient nevertheless, and hurried out of the room. Mr. Bennet, in response to a last injunction from his wife, filled all the kettles and made up the fire. Then he went back to the drawing-room, to help carry Theresa upstairs.

But as he arrived, the door opened, and Dr. Gilpin came out, carrying her in his arms.

"It's all right—I can manage better like this," and he started to go upstairs very evenly and slowly, following

Mrs. Bennet, who held the lamp. At the bend of the stairs she stopped and called back:

"Harry, dear. You'd better go into your study and wait till I come down."

"Can't I do anything?"

"Not now. I'll come to you later."

Her voice was so clipped and calm that it warned him more than if she had screamed. Was Theresa going to die? He opened his mouth to call after Dr. Gilpin, but checked himself, realising that the poor child herself must hear. He would have to wait till the doctor came down again. He stood with his hand upon the knob of his study door, watching the little procession as it disappeared round the angle of the stairs. The last thing he saw—anyway, the last thing he remembered—was Theresa's hair hanging in a colourless, matted lump upon the doctor's arm.

13

It seemed hours that he waited in the study, though really it was not very long. He lit the lamp, and stood it on the little table by the fireside, then he took the crucifix from his writing desk and set it in the circle of light. The light and shadow played queer tricks with it—they threw it monstrous upon the wall, where his eyes sought it rather than in its small reality. As one who, over many years, has had the habit of study prayers, he prayed seated in his worn armchair, his

eyes closed, his hands clasped before him. As one who has prayed much and continuously from youth, he prayed without words, merely holding up Theresa in the arms of his faith before God. When he opened his eyes he saw other arms uplifted in shadow, upon the wall.

At last there was a movement in the house. The sound of voices and footsteps made him go quickly to the door. As he opened it Mrs. Bennet's voice spoke from the bend of the stairs.

"And you'll do your best, Doctor, not to let them know in the village about this?"

"I'll do what I can, Mrs. Bennet."

"Do anything—tell lies—only spare the poor child . . . "

Her voice died away, and Mr. Bennet faced the doctor in bewilderment.

"What is it, Doctor? I'm all in the dark—except that I know there's been an accident . . ."

"There's been no accident," said Dr. Gilpin.

He walked into the study, and the Rector followed him.

"My dear old friend, I'm afraid I'm going to give you a very great shock. . . ."

Then he told him.

During his ministry of nearly forty years, Mr. Bennet had experienced many such shocks. Many times he had put his trust in those who had failed him. Many times he had believed in honesty and innocence

that had never existed, and, worse still, had seen true honesty and innocence give way to deceit and corruption. He had seen strong souls sink under some sudden stress, and virtuous souls suddenly and almost frivolously stoop to crime. He had listened to lies from the truthful, obscenities from the pure, and blasphemies from the devout. Unsophisticated he might be, but he had had the usual priest's-eye view of humanity. Therefore he was not so overwhelmingly shocked and surprised as, perhaps, the doctor had expected. He was stricken rather than shaken—appalled at this fresh instance of the power of Satan going to and fro in the earth.

"Theresa," he murmured, "oh, my poor child . . . poor little Theresa."

"Yes, it's pretty bad—as bad, perhaps, from your point of view as from mine, which is saying a great deal."

"Is she very ill, then?"

"Ill! I should think she was. I'm off home now to telephone to Bulverhythe for a couple of nurses, and to Goldstrow for her aunt."

"It'll be a ghastly blow for Mrs. Millington."

"I don't mind. She deserves it. It's incredible to think that she should have allowed Theresa to come to this. If she'd only looked at her, as she'd have looked at one of her housemaids. . . . I guess who the man is, of course, though I haven't been told."

"I'd never have thought him capable. . . . A good

steady youth . . . too much of a prig. And as for her, she was innocent—quite innocent—hardly grown up. . . ."

"That's just it. That's the trouble now. She didn't even suspect her own condition till two months ago. She's been behaving recklessly, tearing about the country on that wretched bicycle of hers, taking no care of herself whatever, tiring herself out, she told me, so as to make herself stop thinking——"

"Oh, why didn't she trust us? Why didn't she tell Mrs. Bennet? Only think, we were taking her aunt's part against her—doing all we could to separate her from this boy . . ."

"I repeat, she didn't know herself—didn't suspect till a couple of months ago. Even now she's appallingly ignorant—doesn't in the least realise what she's in for. . . . But I mustn't stand talking here. I must be off and get those nurses."

"Is she in great danger? Tell me, Doctor—do you think she'll die?"

"She is in great danger. I can't tell you more than that."

"And—and the child?"

"The child has probably been dead some time. Just as well, perhaps."

He walked out of the room, and Mr. Bennet sat down again in his chair by the fire—a man stricken.

"Oh, Theresa—oh, my child!"

The image of her seemed to rise before him, loung-

ing against her bicycle, with her old brown ulster flopping round her knees, and her hair raying out from her grinning face like the glory of a mediæval sun. She had seemed almost more boy than girl, with her loud laugh and lonely ways and queer, vagabond interests. . . . "I'm mad to see Tenterden Fair" . . . "I followed two gyppos all the way to Providence" . . . "I'm off to the village to hear about the cricket match" . . . "I was in the carpenter's shed all the morning—making a model of the Bulverhythe bus . . ." It seemed incredible that passion had lain in wait for that careless, sexless creature, had snared her and thrown her down and bound her with the common bonds of womanhood. How had it all happened? He could not imagine. Perhaps he would never know.

He could not let himself think any more. Even prayer was dangerous, since it led to thought. He must pray with action, and hurrying out of the study he went upstairs to ask Lucy what he could do. She came to the door for a moment, but her voice was still that of an abrupt stranger.

"Tell Emily to hurry with that hot water—and, Harry, she wants George."

"George Heasman?"

"Yes, of course. You'd better wire for him. The post office will be shut, but you can knock up Mrs. Apps. Tell him to come at once."

"What's his address?"

"Fifteen, Pitt Street, Newbury. He'd better be quick . . ."

"He won't get the wire till tomorrow."

"I can't help that. Hurry up and send it now."

"Lucy, won't you tell me how she is?"

Her lip quivered, and he realised how much her manner was a defence.

"I can't tell you . . . I don't know. Oh, Harry, pray for her."

The door suddenly swept between him and her convulsed face. He found himself shut out into the darkness of the passage, and groped for the stairs.

As he was about to leave the house on his errand, the bell rang, and to his intense relief he found Mrs. Gilpin on the doorstep. Her husband had sent her up to help Mrs. Bennet till the nurses came. He had realised that Poor Emily was a very indifferent help in time of trouble, and that the Rector's wife herself was well stricken in years and confronted with a task that might have daunted many a younger woman. Mrs. Gilpin had had hospital experience, and, moreover, kept a kind heart in her bosom and a quiet tongue in her head. In his relief, Mr. Bennet could have kissed her, though all he did was to greet her somewhat strangely with, "Thank God—go upstairs" —pushing past her out of the house.

The night was dark and full of rain, the trees bowing before a freshening wind from the south-west. Mr. Bennet hurried on, hatless and coatless, hurrying

all the more because he did not really want to send for George Heasman. He felt furious and sick with the young man, and though he knew that he was summoning him only for Theresa's sake, and that if Theresa wanted him even his own wickedness towards her must not stand in the way of her having him, his heart revolted against the summons, against the idea of this betrayer being allowed to play an important part in the final acts of the tragedy he had created. He had never liked Heasman, and now he hated him. In vain he repeated to himself the excuses that he had made again and again for other boys . . . after all, this was not the first boy he had known who had been suddenly snared, who had fallen to demands that were stronger than his brittle code of piety, stronger even than the normal honour of his love. Heasman was different—Heasman was a hypocrite—a bigot who despised other men's faith and then failed to prove his own. Heasman had taken advantage of an innocence greater than the innocence of most girls. In other cases, he had realised that the blame could be divided; but here, with Theresa as the partner of his guilt, Heasman must bear all the blame.

14

On his return he had expected to find Mrs. Millington, but she had not yet arrived. Instead, his wife was sitting in the study—a little figure lost in his big

armchair, her best green gown, worn through all the tragedy, giving an emerald air of raffishness to her sorrow. She had lost the hard shell that had cased and protected her, and was now all suffering tenderness. The picture of her seemed to concentrate in the wet grey ball of a handkerchief that she held on her lap.

"Oh, Harry!" she cried, springing up as he came in. "Oh, Harry, how dreadful it all is!"

He took her in his arms. Bending his cheek to her bowed head his mind went back to the day long ago when their hope had departed from them, and he had held her in his arms, just as he held her now. Her bowed head had been golden then, but he had felt her shuddering, as she shuddered at this moment. . . . Strange to say, a queer thrill of thankfulness went through him—Thank God, it's not our Sylvia we're crying for. Thank God, we've been spared the grief of seeing our daughter as we see Theresa. . . . Sylvia is safe forever . . . she was taken from evils to come.

"Tell me," he whispered, "how's the poor child?"

"Bad—terribly bad. I know Mrs. Gilpin thinks she'll die. . . . Oh, Harry, Harry!"

"I wonder where her aunt is. I'd expected to find her here."

"I don't know. The doctor was going to have 'phoned her at once, but of course she may have been

out. Now I come to think of it, I believe she meant to drive the Bishop to the station."

"I don't care if she never comes. I hope she doesn't. I don't want to see her. I can't trust myself to speak to her after all this."

"Why not? It's not her fault."

"Isn't it, indeed! She's been a criminal fool. I consider her to blame for the whole thing."

"You can't say that. It isn't her fault at all; that's the dreadful part of it. It's our fault—ours."

She broke down and sobbed helplessly.

"Ours? What are you talking about? We never were responsible for Theresa ——"

"Yes we were—at Brighton, and that was where it all happened. We didn't look after her properly; we let her go away into the country by herself, and it was there—there ——"

"But she was with another girl."

"No, she wasn't. She went to meet that young man. She's told me everything. They used to meet in the country outside Brighton, and when she said she had spent the night with Violet Clutter, she had really spent it with him."

"Oh, God."

"Yes, there's no good blaming Mrs. Millington. The affair was quite harmless while they were here at Delmonden; it was only when she was in our charge . . ."

"Then she's lied to us—she's made a convenience of us. We're not to blame. How could we know she

was lying—how could we believe she was capable of such brazen deceit?"

One of his old-man's rages had seized him. His hands began to tremble and his face became fixed and paper-white.

"Oh, Harry, don't be angry with her—now."

"How can I help being angry? I'd no idea she was such an accomplished liar. Think of all the lies she's told us . . . it's abominable. I'd never have believed it."

He lashed at his rage, finding in its clawings a relief from the dull ache of sorrow.

But Mrs. Bennet, who had never imagined such comfort, still tried to persuade him out of it.

"Poor little thing—if she is to blame, she's paying for it now. And it's not her fault so much as the way she's been brought up—she's been abominably brought up."

"And yet you say that woman's not to blame."

"Not for this one especial thing."

"I tell you she is to blame for it. The girl's gone wrong because her aunt has criminally neglected her. She's been so busy meddling with other people's business that she's had no time to look after her own—and she knows nothing about young people—nothing, nothing, nothing."

"She's very fond of Theresa."

"Fond be damned!—and will be damned now. If

she's fond, this will be hell to her; and I'm glad, for if ever a woman deserved hell——"

"Harry! Harry!"

He put her out of his arms, and began pacing up and down the room.

She was frightened, for now it seemed as if his anger must do him some injury in mind or body. But suddenly it all collapsed. He came back to where she stood, and took her hand.

"Forgive me, Lucy. I'm being a troublesome, violent old man who's forgotten he isn't the judge of this. Forgive me, and let's go through it together, as we've been through other things. I want your help, my dear."

"Oh, Harry, you're always such a help to me."

"I should be helpless without you. Now, tell me—what are we going to do? We keep the girl here, I suppose?"

"Oh, of course we must do that. Dr. Gilpin says she can't be moved, and she doesn't want to be. Her one cry is, 'Let me stay here! Don't send me back to Aunt!'"

"That damnable woman——"

"Hush, love. Here she is——"

Mrs. Millington's Daimler had slipped up the drive so silently that in the midst of their discussion they had not heard it. But now there were sounds of arrival in the hall, and they could hear her voice speaking to Poor Emily——

"Where is she? Take me to Mrs. Bennet. You know where she is, I suppose?"

"She's alive," was Emily's reply, "alive and crying with Master in the study."

The next minute the door opened and Mrs. Millington came in. As they went to meet her both the Rector and his wife felt an unexpected throb of pity; for her changed face showed them a being who suffered even more than they. The blow that had stricken them had shattered her whole life and turned her world upside down. She was facing not only the unendurable but the inconceivable. She had been summoned out of all the most pleasant unrealities, out of the tea-table triumphs of the afternoon, to face reality in a quite unbelievable form. According to her long-established ideas, the thing which had happened now was simply impossible. Girls of the lower classes went wrong—indeed, had a marked tendency that way—but not well-brought-up young ladies, such as she imagined Theresa to be. . . . Her mind simply could not conceive such a reversal of what was, in her world, almost a law of nature.

Even now she was not quite convinced.

"Tell me what's happened!" she cried. "Dr. Gilpin told me . . . but it's impossible. There must be some abominable mistake. I'll never believe—but it's really ridiculous . . . Why, if there'd been anything of that kind, I'd have been the first to know."

Neither Mr. Bennet nor his wife could say a word.

Mrs. Bennet's mind painted a picture of awful pathos —a picture of Mrs. Millington pouring out tea for the Bishop, watching him eat her choice cakes and scones, and dazzle her neighbours with his conversation; finally driving him triumphantly to the station in her car, receiving his thanks—"Such a pleasant occasion—such a delightful afternoon"—then coming home to be told bluntly through the telephone by Dr. Gilpin—she could not imagine that he had minced his words, after all the things he had said about her at the Rectory—that her niece was very ill, dying perhaps, and six months gone with child. . . . The expression seemed to sting Mrs. Bennet like a snake as it crossed her mind. She looked up almost expecting to see that Mrs. Millington had been stung.

"Theresa's upstairs," she said gently; "won't you come and see her?"

"Why was she brought here? I must get her home. . . . I must send for a doctor from Bulverhythe. Dr. Gilpin isn't to be trusted. He's talking nonsense—wicked, scandalous nonsense. Theresa's perfectly incapable. . . . Oh, I know she's been self-willed and disobedient, but she's always been so nice-minded—she never thought about men at all till she met that terrible creature. . . . Oh, you don't tell me," in a new twist of horror, "that *he's* got anything to do with it?"

"Of course he has," said Mr. Bennet; "you're only slandering your niece if you think it could be anyone else."

"How dare you speak to me like that? Have you no sense of decency? . . . Well, if that man's to blame, I shall hold you guilty. It was you who introduced them to each other. . . . But for you——"

"Madam, I——"

"Harry, Harry, don't say anything," pleaded his wife. "I can explain to Mrs. Millington much better when we're alone. I'm going to take her upstairs to see Theresa. I expect Dr. Gilpin will be back in a moment."

She guided a shaking and weeping woman out of the room, and he heard them go upstairs.

"Theresa won't see her," he muttered to himself; "she can't bear the sight of her—she won't let her go in."

He found an unworthy comfort in the thought.

15

That night was like no other night. It scarcely seemed like night at all, with nobody in bed, and a constant going to and fro in the house. It was merely a monstrous continuation of the day into darkness. Dr. Gilpin came back, and soon afterwards the nurses arrived. Mr. Bennet helped Poor Emily extemporise a supper for them, but no one had thought of preparing any more bedrooms—indeed it would have been difficult, for, though Delmonden Rectory contained eleven bedrooms, only two or three of them were fur-

nished, the rest being used to store furniture, potatoes, apples, and other useful things.

Mrs. Gilpin, however, was well aware that the Bennets' resources had been taxed beyond their strength; so, as she could now leave the sick room, she hurried off to see what accommodation for the nurses could be found in the village, and if Mabel Breeds or some other such girl couldn't be sent up to share the burden of Poor Emily. She was a resourceful, kind-hearted woman, but a bit too rough, on the whole, for Mr. Bennet, who resented the language she sometimes used, and a certain air of patronage in her voice when she spoke of church matters.

"About as bad as she can be, poor little devil," was her reply to the enquiries with which he intercepted her going.

"Will she—do you—does Dr. Gilpin think she will die?"

"Well, I'm afraid . . . but it all depends—" and she gave him some details that the Rector thought would have been conveyed more suitably by his wife; "anyhow, she won't die just yet. She'll live to see the cause of all her trouble, and forgive him, as he doesn't deserve to be forgiven."

"I doubt if he can get here before tomorrow evening."

"That may do all right, and of course she may pull through—though I'm afraid Tuckie hasn't much hope. You see she's simply been killing herself and the child

for the last few weeks. . . . But don't start bothering her about her soul, there's a good man."

As he was grateful to her for all her kindness, he pretended not to hear the last few words, which were spoken as she walked away. None the less, he brooded over them. She was just like all the rest of the ignorant laity, who make of a deathbed the body's battlefield, and ignore the poor soul, which, after all, has most concern in the issues of the day. Everyone now was fussing over Theresa's body, but who cared for her soul? Had anyone given it even two minutes' attention? . . . Ah, there was a sting in that. For the soul was his business—had been his business for the last year; and he had done nothing. If only he had known . . . if only some angel could have warned him that his day's work for her soul had already run on into the evening, and that the night was coming when no man can work . . . oh, why had he not worked as if he had scarcely an hour? He must not excuse himself with the thought that he might have done more harm than good. He had missed many opportunities, he had been too much of the worldly Parson, waiting an occasion and biding his time. He had sought to win her friendship before he won her soul, and her friendship for him had been her undoing. If she had not asked to go with him and his wife to Brighton—he still thought it was friendship which had made her go with them to Brighton—this terrible thing would never have happened. Again, there was no good ex-

cusing himself by saying that he could not have been expected to look for such treachery in her. The fact remained that the wolf had seized the lamb while that lamb was especially under his care. Oh, miserable shepherd! He stood condemned and he could only plead in his defence the most banal of human excuses —"I never knew . . ." "I did my best . . ." "I meant well . . ." Bah! he would have none of them. He bit down on his own guilt, swallowed it, and felt its bitterness in his very blood. "My fault, my own fault, my own most grievous fault. O Lord, I offer my contrition for her soul, the soul you love, and I have betrayed. Let me stand without excuse, that my punishment may be offered for her. Let the unfaithful shepherd suffer for the sheep he has lost."

After this fashion he mused and prayed while the long night passed. His wife came down and urged him to go to bed, but he would not. He could not have slept, and his help might be needed to keep some watch or run some errand. Anyway, his prayers were needed; so he prayed on. Towards five o'clock a wood pigeon began to croon in the Rectory trees, and immediately the dawn became shrill with waking birds—the voices of blackbird, thrush, and robin, mingled in the first light, liquid and golden as if a part of its essence. Tits and finches chattered round the golden, drawling notes, and the starlings broke in with their song like hissing, sucking water. The sun, watery as the starlings' song, came suddenly through the trees.

He could hear movements overhead, footsteps that went down passages, doors that opened and shut. Sometimes he thought he heard a cry, and his heart thudded painfully. But no one came near him; he was not wanted for the body, and they had forgotten all about the soul. "And no man cared for my soul." At last a clock struck seven and he realised that he must go at once to Delmonden church for his daily Eucharist. He had not even given himself time to shave and bathe—he must appear before his God and his congregation as neglected as Theresa's soul. . . .

His only congregation was Miss Bell, and she was not surprised at the Rector's appearance, having heard the rumour of all that was toward up at the Rectory—"No accident at all. That was Poor Emily's invention—well, they'd probably have to invent something." The village was uncertain as to the facts. Theresa had skulked so determinedly at the background of its doings for the last three months that, though scandal about her had started, it had not taken any definite direction, but there was no limit as to its conjectures, running on the two different lines of illness and accident, according to whether the first news had come from the two motoring young women or the dispersed confirmation candidates. Doubtless, with the new day, the two lines would meet and rumour enlarge itself.

It was hard, thought Mr. Bennet, that when he most needed the comfort of his religious observances, they should be most perversely unreal to him. It was

a hard yet common experience of his ministerial life. When he most longed to lift his mind to Calvary, he would find it weighed down with the burden of petty details—Miss Bell's voice was maddening . . . she'd had that cold all the Winter—she ought to have lost it now . . . sniff, sniff—he simply dreaded her adenoidal responses . . . and the church was all in white after the Confirmation, for Mrs. Bennet had meant to run down before supper last night and change the colours back to Lent; but of course she had not been able to. So the church was all white and innocent, when it ought to have been purple and experienced . . . the flowers on the altar were like children, the boys and girls who yesterday had sung "My God accept my heart this day." There ought to have been no flowers—Lent . . . with the purple cloud of the Passion leaning over the world.

But when the service was over, and Miss Bell had plagued him with her last Abed, and he had made his thanksgiving before the little premature Easter of Delmonden's altar, he felt strengthened. Strength had come to him as it so often came, by no regular channel of emotional experience. It came a little as the sensation of bodily fitness after fasting. His soul felt energised and lean. He walked back up the hill to the Rectory, conscious of a new preparedness, a new capacity for sorrow.

The doctor was just coming away, unshaven as the

Rector. His healthy, weathered face looked tired and drawn.

"Hello—I'm off home for a bite of breakfast. I'll be coming back again."

"How is she?"

"Sinking, I'm afraid."

"Sinking . . . dying?"

"That's it." He spoke roughly in his own distress—"We've had a hell of a night, and though she's lived through it, she's utterly worn out now."

"She seemed so strong . . ."

"Very deceptive—those big healthy-looking girls often have very little staying power. Besides, she's over young for this sort of thing."

"Is she conscious?"

"Yes, quite conscious. But, look here, Rector—go gently with her. If you're wise you'll let her alone—don't bother her about her soul."

"I won't bother her."

He went into the house.

Mrs. Bennet was fluttering in the hall. She looked less haggard than either of the men, but curiously transparent, illuminate—as if fatigue were shining through her.

"Harry, dear, Mrs. Millington is in there, having breakfast. Won't you go to her? She needs you."

He shook his head.

"I'm going to Theresa."

"Oh, Harry, she's so ill . . ."

He looked at her sadly—
"You, too, my dear?"

16

Yet when he found himself alone with Theresa's soul, he felt some of the doubt that the others had shown. Her body lay very flat and still in the wide bed of Delmonden's Gothic spare room. The light, fighting in through the heavy tracery of the window, showed him her straight, extended form, moulded so clearly under the one coverlet as to give even his unpractised eye an impression of utter exhaustion. Her head was low, and her hair looked black upon the pillow rather than red—it had a drenched appearance . . . He remembered how last he had seen it, draggled and clotted on the doctor's arm. Theresa of the flaming hair . . . that fire was extinguished now, and certainly it was not her head that had set her heart alight, though her heart had blazed up and burnt itself out. He felt suddenly afraid of her, as of a stranger.

A nurse came forward out of the shadows of the room. Mr. Bennet regarded her warily, expecting conflict. But, as it happened, the nurse was an ally. She belonged to a church guild for nurses, and had begun to worry herself a little about Theresa's dying unhouselled.

"I'm glad you've come," she whispered. "I think she'll be glad to see you. She's perfectly conscious."

Theresa's eyes were closed. She did not look conscious. She looked already dead, so white was her face, so settled the blanched curve of her lips, and her arms lay straight against her sides as if waiting for someone to fold them upon her breast.

"Theresa," said Mr. Bennet.

Her eyes opened at once, and to his surprise she began to speak—not faintly and stammeringly as he would have expected, but in a thin, anxious voice that needed only to be a little louder to be shrill.

"I want my bicycle. It was left behind in that farm-cart, but if you enquire about it now I'm sure you can get hold of it."

"Dearie, don't worry about that now."

"But I must. I'll be simply lost without my bicycle, and if we wait any longer it may get stolen. The cart was from Owley, over by Wittersham. Do promise me you'll send there and make enquiries."

He turned to the nurse.

"Does she know?"

"I should have thought she must, but she doesn't seem to."

"Theresa, dear, don't worry about your bicycle. You won't want it any more."

"I shall. I shall want it more than ever, now I'm through with all this. When I'm well again I shall go back to what I was before—before . . . and I shall ride all over the country, just as I used to, and forget this bloody time. If I don't have my bicycle I'll never forget."

Her voice began to shake, and the nurse took her hand, feeling the pulse.

"Don't talk any more. It's bad for you. Let Mr. Bennet talk."

"But he must promise to try and find my bicycle——"

"I promise," cried the poor clergyman. "I'll send over to Owley or go myself."

"Thank you, awfully. I knew you would. But the others didn't seem to care."

He was touched, and took her hand which the nurse had left lying outside the coverlet.

"Theresa, I want to help you in a much bigger way than just getting you your bicycle. Will you let me care for your soul? Will you let me bring you the Sacrament?"

"No, I don't want it."

"But you will need it—" his voice trembled—"food for your journey."

"What journey?"

"A long journey into another life."

"Do you mean I'm going to die?"

He could not speak—he just nodded. As he did so, he felt a sudden fear, for he knew he had done what no doctor will tolerate. He had made the patient give up the hope which is life—perhaps the shock, the fear, would kill her. He watched her anxiously, expecting some outcry or convulsion, but Theresa was incapable of anything violent. She only said in the same thin, anxious voice——

"I don't want to die."

"My dear little girl, you needn't be afraid."

"But I want to live—I want to go back to where I was before. I want my bicycle."

"Wouldn't you rather go on, instead of going back?"

"Go on where?"

"To God."

"God," said Theresa, and the way she said it made Mr. Bennet feel cold. In that word, spoken as she spoke it in anguished, incredulous disgust, seemed to lie the whole rebuke of his ministry, and not only of his but that of every priest who had ever ministered. We are the teachers and the fathers, and yet when our children come to die that is how they speak the name of God. We bury ourselves in our little parishes and we forget that outside them are the wandering stars who are also our children, and to whom the name of God is nothing but pain and affront. We have taken his name in vain so often, that it has become vanity. And we comfort ourselves with our Mrs. Iggulsdens and our Mrs. Bodys and our Davy Spongs, and fail our Theresa Silks by whom also we shall be judged.

"Theresa, forgive me."

Her eyes opened again. She was too near death to be bewildered.

"Oh, yes," she said wearily.

The nurse stared. It was not thus that she was used to see the clergy minister to the dying.

v. *George*

I

LATER ON IN THE DAY MR. BENNET BROUGHT THERESA THE FOOD FOR HER JOURNEY, AND ABOUT AN HOUR afterwards she set out, still querulously reluctant, still wanting her bicycle. . . . Perhaps he should not have given her the Sacrament, seeing how little it meant to her. But that, he told himself, was his own fault—or if not personally his, the fault of other priests with whom he stood condemned as a member of the body. Anyway, he would earn no more reproaches from her soul.

Her aunt, Mrs. Bennet, and he, himself, were all with her when she died, but George had not come, nor did she speak of him. After having asked for him once, she seemed to have forgotten him. As the end drew near, she seemed to become more and more as she used to be before passion and suffering had made a reluctant woman of her. She died with no regrets save for the lost wildness of her days.

It was not only Theresa who forgot poor George. Everyone else forgot him—till he arrived suddenly in the twilight. The Bennets were having a late, exhausted tea together, having persuaded Mrs. Millington to go back to Goldstrow and leave them to face,

more practically than she was able, the approaching routine of undertakers. When they heard footsteps in the drive they thought it was Mr. Buss, the undertaker from Cranbrook, though there was a certain surprise in his not having come by car. Mrs. Bennet nearly let loose a scream, when, instead of the expected corpulence struggling to assume funereal poise and to compose its crimson features into the proper mask of gloom, she found herself staring into the real agony of George Heasman's face, as he came towards them like an exhausted runner, with panting mouth and starting, smouldering eyes.

"Harry!" she cried. "It's George."

"George Heasman!"

"Yes, of course—and we'd forgotten all about him."

The Rector was irascible again in his fatigue.

"Well, it's his own fault, the silly hound. Why didn't he send a wire to say that he was coming?"

"Oh, my dear, I don't suppose he thought of it . . . and nothing's ready for him.—I haven't even a bed for him to sleep in—and we'll have to tell him that he's too late."

It was not the first time that either of them had had to break the news of death, and often in circumstances more casually cruel than this. Now each wanted to spare the other the experienced pain.

"I'll go and meet him," said Mrs. Bennet.

"No, let me do that."

"I'd much better go—"she just stopped herself adding—"he'll take it better from me."

"It isn't your job."

"Of course it is—and we mustn't go on arguing, or he'll ring the bell and be told goodness knows what by Poor Emily."

She hurried out of the room. She hated what she had to do, but she wanted to spare her husband. She knew that because he disliked George Heasman it would hurt him all the more to strike him; she did not like George either, but she told herself that she was made of harder stuff than Harry, because she was not so spiritual. All she hoped was that her victim would not laugh; that had happened once—unforgettably. As she opened the front door she seemed to hear that harsh clatter of laughter with which a fellow creature had once greeted the end of his world.

George did not laugh. He stared at her as if he did not believe her, and then when she was forced to repeat her words, he began most strangely and pitifully to cry. He wept with his head on her shoulder. He was shatteringly tired and he wanted some food. He asked her if there was anything he could have to eat . . . she was glad Harry had not gone to meet him.

She took him into the dining-room and brought a loaf of bread and some butter and cheese, and ran to see if Emily's kettle was boiling. Then as she sat down opposite him, to give what comfort he might seem

to need as he filled his belly, she suddenly realised that he did not know why Theresa had died. This realisation frightened her so much that she got up and walked out of the room. Somehow she had taken for granted that he knew; yet, how could he? for Theresa had almost certainly never told him. She could not think how she should break it to him now. It was queer that he had never asked. . . . He seemed beaten and stupid with his own fatigue, and no doubt, poor boy, he must be exhausted after that dreadful cross-country journey. . . . How terribly you can suffer in the train, listening to the racket that rhymes your grief! . . . He must have been nearly frantic when he arrived, so frantic that the blow which ended apprehension had almost brought relief. No wonder he was eating so much. What she had to tell him would not help his digestion. She had better go in and stop him before he ate any more. . . . At that, somebody laughed loudly, and to her dismay she found that it was herself.

2

She arranged for him to have Poor Emily's bedroom—it was easy enough to send her down to Mabel Breed's for the night. So he never knew that he had been forgotten and unprepared for. He never knew, either, that Theresa seemed at the last to have forgotten all about him.

"She asked for you," Mrs. Bennet kept on repeating, "she asked for you almost directly she came here."

She felt a little annoyed when she saw that he seemed to take all that for granted. Indeed, as he revived with the comfort of food and rest and her kindly tongue, he began to show a certain resentment of the fact that he had not been sent for earlier.

"If only the telegram had come last night I could have got here in time."

There was no doubt that the poor youth had an exasperating manner that did him no service—a truculent, injured, defensive manner, as if he expected slights and misunderstanding.

"We sent for you practically at once," she apologised, "because she asked for you at once."

She thought—"It's a mercy he doesn't know that we all forgot him afterwards."

"But hadn't you any idea," he persisted, "that this was coming? Couldn't you see? Didn't anybody guess? . . . Oh, I tell you I can hardly believe it, I can hardly believe it."

"Theresa kept very much to herself all this Winter, and you know her aunt was away from the beginning of January. I often asked her to come here, but she wouldn't . . . and she'd quite given up going in the village. . . . She went bumping about the country on that awful bicycle of hers. Oh, if I'd only known, I'd have broken it to pieces!"

"But why didn't she tell me? If only she'd told me

this would never have happened. I'd have married her—nobody should have stopped me. I'd have saved her. I'd have . . . the poor little thing. Oh, the poor little thing!"

He was weeping again—his strange, exhausted tears that it tore her heart to witness.

"Don't do that," she whispered, uttering her protest, yet hoping it was not heard.

"Lord help me!" he groaned, "this is my doing. I've killed her—I've murdered her. Oh, how could I have been such a swine as to take advantage of her. O Lord, O Lord!"

Mrs. Bennet said nothing.

"And you—what do you think of me? How can you bear to sit in the same room as me? I'm a seducer and a murderer—I, a Preacher of the Gospel, called of God. All I've done is to betray a child. Tell me, what do you think of me?"

"I—I think you were both betrayed by a wicked power that took advantage of you both. You—you shouldn't have trusted it so far."

"You're merciful," he said, taking away his hands from before his face, and staring at her with his red eyes. "You're merciful. But you don't know how bad I am—how far I've fallen. You don't know that I've fallen right away from grace. I was a Preacher of the Gospel, and the Lord gave me wonderful lights—but I've not opened my mouth in praise or prayer or preaching since that day. My tongue belongs to Sa-

tan, for I coaxed her with it from good ways. My lips are Satan's, sold with kisses. Oh, how can I ever tell you the horror of when the Lord gave me Scripture from the hedge—'Repent ye and believe the Gospel.' I saw that written up on a board by the Worthing road, outside the house where we slept in all our sins, and I tell you those words have been bleeding wounds to me ever since. 'Repent ye and believe the Gospel.' Oh, I believe the Gospel all right, but I haven't repented. I can't repent. I'm the profane person such as Esau who for a morsel of meat sold his birthright and found no place for repentance though he sought it with tears. Tears—oh, yes, tears have been bread and meat to me since that day. But tears won't wash me clean. And now she's dead, my lovely one, dead through my sins and dead for my sins. The Lord has slain her as he slew David's son and Ezekiel's wife, for a Sign. She's dead through my sins, and for my sins, and in her sins—for a Sign. And this is the Sign written—'The man of God who was disobedient unto the Word of the Lord.'"

Mrs. Bennet stared at him open-mouthed. Seldom had she listened to such an astonishing flow of oratory. For the first time she visaged George as a preacher, a conception of him which had so far baffled her. Indeed she almost felt as if she now were "sitting under" him, receiving at her own dining-room table his ministry of the Word.

The outburst seemed to have relieved him. There

had been a release of the preacher denied. His eyes burned out of their red rims, and his hands trembled as he gripped them together on the table.

"Don't you shrink—" he cried, "don't you shrink from the thought that you are giving hospitality to such a brute?"

"No, of course I don't. How could I? It's not for me to judge you. As my husband says, we often forget we are not judges."

"Your husband!" She had been unfortunate. She could feel his hackles rising. "Your husband—I know what your husband thinks of me. He says, 'This is the end of schism. This is where they all end—these hedge-preachers.'"

"Oh, hush. He says nothing of the kind."

"He does. He's always despised me."

"No, he doesn't despise you. How can you imagine such a thing! He has always been on your side—taken your part against Mrs. Millington——"

"He didn't. He acted as her ambassador."

"He had to try to persuade you to accept her terms, as there was no other hope for you both just then. But you know where his sympathies lay . . . and now, I know how deeply he feels for you. You must see him, and perhaps he will be able to help you with all these dreadful spiritual experiences you are going through."

"How could he help me with his vanity of works? If the Gospel cannot help me—the pure Gospel of

faith—then he certainly cannot help me with his dead works and magical sacraments."

"You really mustn't talk like that."

She was beginning to feel annoyed with him again, but just as her annoyance found words, down went his head once more on the table, and the Preacher collapsed in exhausted tears, vain self-accusations, and frantic, useless cries: "Oh, my pretty one, my love, my little darling—come back! come back!"

3

The next day George went to stay with his parents at Ethnam. He refused to accept the hospitality of the Rectory for more than one night, and he refused to go back to Newbury till after Theresa's funeral. Indeed, he hinted that he might never go back there at all—he had only gone in order to help his love through its crisis, and now that love lay past all crisis and beyond all help, ready for burial.

Mr. Bennet thought him unwise, but did not say so. He had a sneaking sympathy with the poor chap's wish to attend his sweetheart's funeral, even though some might hold him responsible for her death. As for his reluctance to go back to work, that too was natural, and perhaps would pass when he had recovered a little from his misery and shock. He was heartily glad, however, that he had removed himself from the Rectory. For though his heart was compassionate

towards poor George, he could not help finding him insufferable. His manner of mixed truculence and resentful inferiority did not help anyone to forget that he had helped do Theresa to death. Out of his welter of self-accusation Mr. Bennet had picked a self-righteous neglect which seemed to him more hateful than any of the "betrayals," "seductions," and "fornications" that fell so freely from the sinner's tongue.

Nevertheless, he took George's part against Mrs. Millington when she demanded that he should forthwith remove himself from the country. He had gone up to Goldstrow to arrange with her about the funeral. Theresa's body had already been taken to the great house where she had refused to die. It lay in unnatural state among the flowers that had been sent by Mrs. Millington's friends—friends who whispered and wondered and asked each other questions that would never be answered.

As she let him in, the parlour-maid suggested that he should go and see her, "She looks beautiful, Sir—quite beautiful." But Mr. Bennet did not want to see Theresa looking beautiful. During her life she had known no beauty but the beauty of the sun—of glowing health and tan and freckles and ruddy, raying hair; but now she was dead her beauty was of the moon, cold and colourless and exquisite and unreal. He had seen her once in her lunar beauty and he did not want to see her again.

Mrs. Millington was in bed. She had been there ever

since she left the Rectory, attended by Dr. Gilpin for shock. In her case "shock" was no mere fine name for nerves and mental sloth. When he saw her face, something in Mr. Bennet said "she has picked a mandrake." He did not know where the words came from, but he seemed to see a picture of Mrs. Millington walking in a garden and picking a flower that looked like a lily—up it came, roots and all, and the roots screamed at her, and she fell down fainting, unable to throw it away because of the screaming roots that clung and twisted in her gown.

Her eyes were half closed, and she scarcely seemed to see him as he came into the room. But when in his new compassion he would have pressed her hand that lay on the counterpane, she pulled it away .

"I am terribly, terribly distressed," she said in a low, hoarse voice.

"I know," he murmured, his compassion surviving repulse.

"But how could you do—allow such an abominable thing?"

"I—what?"

"That scoundrel to go to Ethnam, to stay at Ethnam. You should have sent him away—you should never have let him come. And yet I hear you sent for him."

"She asked for him."

"She was delirious—she'd never have known if you hadn't . . . and anyway, what difference did it make? He didn't get there in time."

"I hoped he would."

His compassion was melting. The mandrake had not changed her much.

"You hoped he would! . . . well, and now he's here, publicly staying here—and everyone will guess—know . . ."

"There's no reason why they should. His being here doesn't mean more than anyone knows already—that he loved her and hoped to marry her."

"How could he hope any such thing after all I said? . . . Well, now he's here and I'm told he means to stay till after the funeral. It's absolutely dreadful for me to know he's here, and will go on coming here, I suppose, while his parents are at Ethnam. Thank heaven, that Heasman's lease falls in this year. . . . But I want you to go round and tell him he musn't stay. I won't see his face. If he goes to the funeral, I shan't. It's a simply appalling state of affairs."

"I've already advised him to go away, but he won't listen to me."

"You must try again—you must make him go. I can't understand how he dare come to the funeral, seeing that he's killed Theresa."

"I don't think you can quite put it like that."

"I can and will. It's owing to him and his wickedness that she's dead."

"We must all take some of the blame for her death."

"What do you mean?"

He had meant—"Her death is due to the ignorance

and the omissions of us all, and largely to your preconceived, class-bred notions of life which would not allow you to think your niece capable of the same sins as any other ignorant and unprincipled girl, which made you ignore signs that in a housemaid would have worked you into a frenzy of suspicion. She died of her own ignorance, which was not really hers so much as a thing made up of the ignorance of us all, our slackness and our blindness. We are all her betrayers."

"What do you mean?" repeated Mrs. Millington, as he did not speak.

"I mean that if Theresa had taken proper care of herself, she would almost certainly be alive now—and it was the fault of the people who had the charge of her that she didn't take care."

"How can you say such a thing? How dare you say it? Are you suggesting that I should have suspected that . . . suspected her—my own niece? I tell you, even now I can scarcely believe it. It seems like—like something I've read in a wicked novel—something that could never happen to me."

He was beginning to feel sorry for her again, for her mouth was shaking and working like a very old woman's, and she plucked at the sheet as if she still plucked at the mandrake's roots.

"Don't let's talk any more about this thing—don't let's blame anyone, not even ourselves."

"But you said we were all to blame. You said it was my fault that Theresa didn't take proper care of

herself—that I ought to have known, suspected my own niece, my lovely girl, who never had a wicked thought—who never knew a thing about wickedness . . . you take the part of that scoundrel who brought her to this. I tell you he's her murderer as surely as if he'd killed her with his hands. And you—what about you? You had her in your charge and you took no proper care of her—you let her go wandering about all day and all night with that villain——"

"How was I to know she was with him?"

"You ought to have taken more care. She was in your charge, and if you'd looked after her properly all this would never have happened."

Mr. Bennet had told himself many times this very thing, but it did not follow that he wished to hear it even once from Mrs. Millington.

"If you didn't choose to suspect her, why should I?"

"I trusted you, and the poor child wanted to go with you, so I let her go. I was a fool—after those other things."

"What other things?"

"It was your wife who introduced George Heasman to her—took her to tea at Ethnam, to tea in a farmhouse kitchen, as if she was one of themselves. It shows you are neither of you so particular as I am—and then there was Susan Lamb."

"What about Susan Lamb?"

"You were exceedingly lax about her. You let her enter my service without telling me the sort of girl

she was. I ought to have known from that that you were no fit and proper guardian for my niece."

Mr. Bennet got up and walked to the door. He was white and shaking with anger. He could no longer feel any compassion for the frenzied old woman in the bed. In vain he told himself that she was half mad with shock and suffering, and that it was terrible to quarrel like this over Theresa's death. The besetting sin had once more got the better of him. He trembled with rage, and it was some moments before he found breath to say:

"That being so, it seems unsuitable that I should conduct the funeral."

"It certainly is unsuitable, and I should never have dreamed of asking you to do it. I have written to my dear Mr. Grant, and he will come and lay my poor child to rest."

"You've had the effrontery to do that! But he can't come without my permission. I'm the Parson of this Parish, and I have the right to officiate. That man can't utter a word unless I allow it."

For a moment he was uncertain whether or not he had uttered these words out loud. Then by the look on her face he saw that he had.

"I shall write to the Bishop," she said in a tight, whispering voice, "I shall write to the Bishop."

"Write certainly, if you like; the Bishop can only uphold me in this."

But his anger was cooling, sinking suddenly like an

exhausted fire. He saw his behaviour as unwarrantable, unworthy. It was terrible to think that after a ministry of over forty years he could lose his temper like this with a wretched old woman who was in hell.

"I'm sorry," he said hoarsely, "I waive my rights. I'm not worthy to stand beside her grave. Mr. Grant shall officiate——" and he walked out, leaving her with shock and triumph contending for the mastery of her mind.

4

After all, George Heasman did not go to the funeral, stopped by no persuasion but by a heavy chill he contracted through wandering about the country in the rain. It appeared that he had gone down every day to the Rother marshes and had not come back till dark. His parents had tried in vain to keep him at home—his haunted spirit drove him down to that half-drowned country between Wittersham and Iden where Wet Level spreads a sheet of many waters—the flood of many streams—between the coasts of Sussex and Kent, reviving the lost beauty of that great forgotten waters'-meet which once had been the Rother's mouth. From that most sad and most sweet land he had taken the sadness and left the sweetness, and now he was sick of the chills of the wet earth and of his own tears.

Mr. Bennet took no part in the funeral, though he

wore his cassock and surplice and stood beside Theresa's grave. He had maintained his humility. But to have put himself lower—into the congregation—might have roused comment, thrown a fresh weight in the scale of gossip which was sinking against her light reputation. The service was conducted with due unction by "Aunt's awful Reverend Grant," and a great throng of villagers attended. There had been a certain amount of local disappointment when it became known that no inquest would be held, but a fine London funeral, such as this, was regarded as the next best thing.

Yet it was not mere rumour and curiosity that had brought many of them there. Certain currents of sympathy were flowing in that black crowd which dotted the churchyard. No one had particularly loved Theresa; for her manners, which were neither those of the lady she ought to have been nor of the gipsy she could not quite be, had for the most part repulsed and shocked and starched the villagers of Delmonden. But deep in their hearts was something which urged them to go out and mourn her youth. She was a young thing dying untimely in the Spring, and, perhaps, there still survived in them, kept awake by the murmurings of the earth they lived so near, pale, atavistic memories of the days when, by the Rother's mouth every Spring, Baldur the Beautiful was slain by a blind brother's hand.

Mr. Bennet, as he watched his sheep, wondered how much they knew. He had dammed the streams of gossip on the surface, but he guessed that they still flowed underground. Dr. Gilpin had certainly done his best; he had said a great deal and said it incomprehensibly, which was quite the best way of dealing with the occasion. To have shown reticence would have roused almost the same surmises as to have spoken clearly. He had absolute trust in the discretion of the two nurses he had engaged, and it was possible, he declared, that the real story would never be known if only Mrs. Millington and George Heasman kept their heads. Both were doubtful; but George's indiscretions were not likely to go beyond his family, since he had met, or spoken to, no one since his arrival in Delmonden. As for Mrs. Millington, both the doctor and the Rector agreed that the best thing she could do would be to go away for a while. If she left Goldstrow, if she left it even for the Summer, the scandal might die down and be forgotten. The doctor undertook to suggest it as a necessary part of her cure.

The following Sunday, Mr. Bennet thought she had gone, for it was Palm Sunday and she was not in church. But later he heard that she considered herself too ill to go, and was still in bed. During the week he thought but little of her. Holy Week seemed to take Theresa's death out of its earthly setting and lift it into a dim heavenly significance, with other trivial, translated things. It was the week of death, of all

death, of all the little swarming crepitant deaths of earth gathered up into one tremendous Death—of a God who no longer smiled faintly through the beautiful eyes of Baldur, but wept consumingly through the terrible eyes of Christ. The pagan priest lost his sense of pressing controversies and complications, as he tried feebly to minister to the story of that week. He felt himself lost in the wood of the Passion—Christ's little ass that had borne him into Jerusalem, now lost in the wood among the horns of the Unicorns. . . . "They stand staring and looking upon me . . . save me from the lion's mouth: thou hast heard me also from among the horns of the Unicorns."

Once more the God had died in the Spring, and the earth mourned—but hypocritically, for she felt the stirrings of the new life within her, the life that his death had bought. Sunshine lay over the fields that were, on this April Friday, the flowery cenacle of the buried Lord. Already within them the risen life was stirring; Spring had been bought, was given. The Easter sun blazed down upon the meadows, and in the church, scented with primroses and willow catkin, children's and old folks' voices sang windily:

Lo, the fair beauty of earth, from the death of the winter arising,
Every good gift of the year now with its Master returns.

The pagan priest came out of the wood of the Passion, stood for a while in the garden, and then passed

back into the controversies and complications of his daily life.

5

It was Mrs. Bennet who told him that Mrs. Millington was not in church, and Mrs. Apps and Mrs. Boorman and several others gave him the news that she had driven into Bulverhythe for service on Easter Sunday. His Easter Offering went short of that five pounds she had generously contributed last year, and of the half-crown she might conceivably have given in this. "I wonder what she means," thought Mr. Bennet to himself.

Evidently she meant to break her connection with Delmonden church. She was so angry with him that she would no longer accept his ministry. He hoped that she would soon relent, for her proclaimed and sensational pilgrimages to Bulverhythe would create a bad impression. He hoped too that she would leave Goldstrow, if only for a little while, and after the Easter vestry he walked home with the newly elected people's warden and asked him if he had offered any advice of that kind.

"Advice! Why, of course I have—but she won't take it. She has her own prescription."

"What's that?"

"That *you* should go."

"I! Good heavens! What does the woman mean?"

"That you should resign—just that."

The doctor laughed heartily, but Mr. Bennet looked grim.

"Don't worry, my friend," said the warden; "she'll get over it, and I feel pretty sure of being able to persuade her abroad before long. But at present she's obstinate, and she has an obsession in the way of fixing the blame of that poor girl's death on somebody. It's part of the after-effect of shock, and if you'll excuse plain speaking, you said something to her that wasn't very wise."

"What did I say?"

"Apparently something that suggested she was to blame for Theresa's death."

"I didn't. I said we were all to blame."

"Well, in her agitated state she seems to have taken it in a way you didn't intend—or did you intend?"

"I confess that I wanted her to see that she couldn't put all the blame on George Heasman."

"Quite so; and you probably told her something that she was secretly conscious of already, for it's become an obsession, and in order to escape from it she's accusing you."

"Accusing me of what?"

"Of general neglect and slackness in your moral attitude. She's raked up some preposterous story about a housemaid of hers who once had a baby, and that appears too to have been your fault."

"Look here——"

"Of course, I just laughed. But about other things I had to be more sympathetic; though needless to say I took your part. Her ideas are ridiculous, and as she gets better she'll see it herself and drop them—at least I hope so."

"I hope so too. It'll come pretty hard on us here if she drives into Bulverhythe every Sunday for church."

"We shall survive—and I think she'll recover. But, poor soul, she's had a ghastly experience, even if she did deserve some of it. Meanwhile, I'd keep out of her way if I were you."

"You're afraid of my upsetting her again?"

"In part," said his physician, frankly—"also she has it in her power to make things still more unpleasant for you. I think it's only fair to tell you that she's written to the Bishop."

"Great heavens! She's had the nerve to do that!"

"It's an outlet—and I don't suppose it'll do you much harm. You and I both know that every Bishop gets dozens of letters like that every week and just puts them into the waste-paper basket."

"He won't in this case. She's a sort of connection of his by marriage——"

"Yes, I know—we've all been told. But I don't expect that'll make any difference—he'll merely send a polite, non-committal answer, and put her on his black list of interfering women."

"I don't believe it—"the anti-episcopal complex was rising in all its strength—"I don't believe it. Bishops

are only too glad to hear anything against the more troublesome of their clergy."

"But you're not troublesome."

"A Catholic priest is always troublesome to an Evangelical bishop."

"Oh, come, come. Things aren't so rotten as all that—and I believe most of the counts against you were moral, not ecclesiastical. He'll just laugh."

"Most of them . . . then some were ecclesiastical. Do you know what they were?"

"I don't—though I believe she told me some of them. She complained of hundreds of things, everything here, in fact, that isn't the same as at St. Smaragdus, South Kensington. I tell you the Bishop will laugh."

"He won't," said Mr. Bennet, gloomily.

6

A few days later the situation was relieved by Mrs. Millington's departure. Low Sunday would be spared the scandal of her Daimler humming past Delmonden church door on its way to Bulverhythe. She had gone to London, whence probably soon she would set out for the Continent on a prolonged trip. Dr. Gilpin had done his work, and Delmonden Rectory breathed an air clear again of the fumes of Goldstrow.

George was still at Ethnam, still sick, still shut away. Mr. Bennet pondered whether he ought to go to see

him. George was none of his flock, though his parents were nominally in the fold. He ought to go to see them, yet his whole being recoiled from another interview with George Heasman. Once again, he knew, he would have to stand in futile post-mortem over the body of his poor girl, whose death had been lost in the wood of the Passion.

So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
And tricks his beams and with new-spangled ore
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky.
So Lycidas, sunk low, is mounted high
By the dear might of Him who walked the waves. . . .

Once more he had put Theresa back into the sun, and it would be terrible again to have her come out and once more stand in judgment, while George accused himself petulantly and vainly, till in the end his own absolved misdeeds arose and shook their skulls at him—dead giants who shall not praise the Lord.

Yet he knew that he ought to go, and, in the end, he went, because he realised that if he did not go, his heart might one day accuse him, and he dared not face the judgment of another missed opportunity. He could endure poor George a little for the Lord's sake, a little for Theresa's, and a little for his own.

It was a quiet warm day at the end of Easter week; the sun had not broken through the veil of cloud that hung over the earth, and all the country lay in subdued colours, as if resting Sabbatically at the end of

the Feast. All the greens were a little grey, all the yellows a little brown, and the first white of the hawthorn seemed shadowed in the hedge. The air had a heavy, lightly languorous quality, Summer breathing into April. It seemed to hold and cherish scents rather than let them blow, so that, at the corner by Castle Toll, Mr. Bennet walked through the scent of young grass, and, by Lomas, he came into a heavy, hanging smell of cows and milk, while at Ethnam, where last week's rain still lay in yellow, hoof-shaped puddles by the gate, rose the slight, secret smell of the earth herself, to mix with the smell of standing rain, and the lingering smell of beasts.

The place looked quiet and empty. There did not seem to be anyone about, but on his way up the drive, he met the ploughman coming down it with a pair of horses.

"They're at Market, Sir—over at Tenterden. The Master and Mistress too; though I reckon they'll be home for their tea."

"George Heasman is at home, isn't he?"

"Yes, Sir—he's at home. All alone in the house, if you care to go up and see him."

"I'll go. Perhaps the Master will come back before I leave."

"Maybe he will, Sir. He'll want to have a look at the Four-Acre field before it's dusk. We're putting it under the harrow today, and hoping for a bit less camomile this year."

Mr. Bennet had perforce to follow the example of the joker and laugh at the joke, though, in his heart, he felt sorry for poor Heasman, with his plague of camomile. It was partly his own fault, no doubt, for he starved his fields; but the poor man would be wretched enough when he had to leave at the end of the year. He had farmed Ethnam for nearly twenty years under the Fleets, and had not done so badly—only of late he seemed to have lost heart. Mr. Bennet suspected a hidden story of ill-health and struggle which would make it all the harder for him to start in a new place. . . . George's father as well as his sweetheart had suffered for his sins.

The door of the little house was ajar, and the Rector walked in. He purposely made a great deal of noise, clattering with his stick, but no sounds came from above. He went upstairs and knocked at one or two doors, but nobody answered. He pushed open the doors and looked in, at the usual furniture-crowded bedrooms of a farmhouse, till he came at last to George Heasman's room; at least, it looked as if it must be his, for the bed, unlike the others, had not been made, and the whole little place showed signs of recent occupation. All this seemed strange, for George was certainly supposed to be in bed. Mr. Bennet put his hand on the sheet, which was still warm. No doubt there was a normal explanation, but he could not check a feeling of alarm, for not only the room but the whole house was empty. Then he caught sight of two en-

velopes on the chest of drawers. Peering at them, he was able to read the addresses without his spectacles—"Father and Mother." "The Coroner."

For a moment, he felt paralysed, held by the feet to the shabby brown carpet, unable to move or to think. Then his brain moved—he knew that he must act, stop this abominable, lunatic plan of that abominable lunatic George Heasman. . . . Rage released what fright had bound, and he dashed out of the room, shouting for help.

He must get hold of someone, call up the men from the fields, the chicken girl from wherever she had hidden herself, and perhaps they would be able to catch George and stop him before he had committed his crowning act of foolery and wickedness. As he ran, he remembered that the bed was still warm, so the wretched boy could not have been out of it long. Where was he? How did he propose to end his miserable life? By drowning himself in a dyke? By hanging himself in a barn? There were half a dozen ways, each one of which might have taken him to a different place. Mr. Bennet saw that he had acted too quickly—he ought to have read the farewell letters, which would possibly have told him what George proposed to do. But there was no time to go back now—he must find somebody first. The yard seemed empty. He looked into the barns and saw only shadows; he shouted, but only echoes answered him.

Then as he paused breathless for a moment by the

oast-house, he thought he heard a sound within—a cough. He waited, and there came a whole fit of coughing. He dashed round to the barn door, and through the great barn with its piles of straw and roots, to the little door that led into the oast. There on the earthen floor in the darkness crouched George Heasman, coughing and gasping, and clutching a big old-fashioned shot-gun.

Mr. Bennet too was gasping with his haste. They stared at each other in the dim light that crept down to them through the cowl of the oast. Then suddenly the boy threw down the gun and cursed.

"Damn you! Why have you come here?"

"To find you—to stop you. What in God's name are you after?"

"My own business."

"I know quite well what that is. I've been into the house—into your bedroom. Pick yourself up and come back there at once."

George picked himself up, but not to come back. His eyes glared insanely, and with a sudden crafty movement he seized the gun. Mr. Bennet sprang forward only just in time, and for a minute they struggled desperately. George was by age and nature the stronger man of the two, but his illness had weakened him, and the Rector was able to prevent him getting the barrel to his head. Then suddenly the gun went off.

In the small funnel-shaped space of the oast the ex-

plosion was indescribable. The noise seemed to run round and round the walls, crashing and echoing, while the air reeked and stifled with fumes and stench. At first both George and Mr. Bennet were surprised to find themselves alive. They sat on the floor with dishevelled hair and grimy startled faces, rubbing their heads and staring at each other.

The older man recovered himself first.

"You fool!" he cried. "You fool! You fool! You fool!"

"Are you hurt?" asked George, stupidly.

"Hurt! If I'm not it's no thanks to you, you brainless, senseless, gutless—but I mustn't talk like this. Get up and come home at once."

"I can't. I can't."

"You must. You must get back into bed before you catch pneumonia and die."

"That's why I came here—to die. And I'd have been dead now and the world rid of me if you hadn't interfered."

"Thank God I did!"

"Why should you thank God? I'm much better dead."

In his anger against him Mr. Bennet felt inclined to agree, but with an effort he mastered his dislike of the poor wretched young man.

"Come, come. You mustn't talk like that. Let's go up to the house—I feel I want a drink of something after a shock like that. And if we stop here, the men

may come in and find us; they're sure to have heard that noise."

"They won't. They're down in the Four-Acre. I made sure of that before I came out."

"Then all this was deliberately planned?"

"I reckon it was. You don't shoot yourself all of a sudden with this sort of gun. I chose a day my Mam and Dad were off to market and the Four-Acre due to be harrowed. Then I told the gal she could go home till tea-time, and I fetched the gun, which is the only one I got so I had to do my best with it. But you must lay down to kill yourself properly with a shot-gun, and it was that what spoiled my chance, for as soon as I lay down these days I start coughing . . ."

Talking seemed to have the same effect, and once more a spasm convulsed him. He hooped his back and the tears streamed down his cheeks. Mr. Bennet seized him by the arm and dragged him out of the oast while he was still helpless. He wore only his shirt and trousers, and his bare feet shuffled reluctantly in the mud and dust of the yard, but he offered no resistance. He let the Rector bring him into the house, into the kitchen where a fire was burning.

7

"There now," said Mr. Bennet, pushing him down into an armchair, "you get warm, and then you can tell me what made you do this thing."

He suddenly felt very sorry for George. Hitherto his chief emotions had been fear and anger and a sense of haste. His mind had been too full of turmoil for pity. But now the turmoil had died down, and the pity was there, plucking at his heart; he looked down uneasily at George, very much as he had once looked down at Theresa. The pity was not quite the same; it was not so pure, not so self-reproaching. But here again was a young life in torment and futility. He looked down at the bowed head with its brown mass of hair, and something in that bowed young head, something clumsy and helpless in the bowed neck and shoulders, gave him a new, tender feeling of fatherhood. George almost became a son.

"You want something to buck you up and warm you," he said, taking the boy's cold, slack hand. "Is there any brandy in the house?"

"Brandy! Why should there be brandy? Anyway, I wouldn't touch it."

"Ah . . . well, never mind. I'll make you a cup of tea—I'm quite handy at it, and it won't take long."

He busied himself with a kettle that was pushed to the back of the stove. George stared at him apathetically. His frenzy over, he seemed to have collapsed into indifference. He shivered a little as he sat there by the fire.

"Perhaps you ought to go to bed," said Mr. Bennet.

"I'd sooner stay here. It's warmer."

"I don't want your parents to come in and find you like this."

"They won't come in for a good hour yet. Look here, you won't tell them, will you? Not them nor anybody?"

"I won't, if you promise me one thing—not to do it again, not to go out after I'm gone and have another try."

A tired bitter look came on George's face.

"Reckon all that's over—I'd never have the courage to start it again."

"I'm thankful."

"Not but what I hadn't much better have finished it when I was at it. . . . But I don't want my poor Mam and Dad to know. Reckon I've given them quite enough trouble. See here, there's my letter to them upstairs—and to the Coroner. I must get hold of them and burn them, or maybe they'll be found."

"I'll fetch them now; and I'll fetch that gun out of the oast, or someone will be wondering how it came there."

"You're very kind."

He seemed grateful for the attention he was receiving, more grateful to the Rector for waiting on him and running his errands than for having saved him from death. A few minutes later the gun was back in its place in the harness room, the letters were in the fire, and George's cold hands were creeping round the cup of hot tea that Mr. Bennet had given him.

"You're very kind," he repeated.

"I don't want you to think of it as kindness. I'm just a human being whom God has sent to be with you in a bad hour."

"I don't believe . . . no, He never sent you. He knows I should ought to be dead."

"Don't talk like that. Remember what you are."

"What I am! O Lord! that's good! As if I could forget."

"You know that isn't what I mean. I'm only trying to remind you that you're a preacher of the Gospel."

"I'm not. I haven't preached for over a year now—not since . . . I'll never preach again."

"Why?"

"Because—well, you needn't pretend you don't know."

"I know why you haven't been preaching since you left Delmonden but I can't see any reason why you shouldn't preach again."

"I can see plenty—and so I reckon would you if I was after taking orders in your Church."

Mr. Bennet made himself suddenly busy again with the tea-kettle. He must not allow himself to be provoked.

He said, after a while:

"I should rejoice if I thought that at any future time there was a chance of your taking orders in my Church, as you call it. I know you've sinned—but surely you believe in the forgiveness of sins?"

"For them that repent."

"And haven't you repented?"

"How do I know? How can I know? I've sought a place of repentance, but maybe there's none for such as me."

"How can there be none?"

George did not speak. He covered his face.

"There is a sin unto death," he groaned suddenly.

"But, my dear boy. My dear good fellow, what makes you think you have committed it?"

"My own heart tells me . . . and if our heart condemn us, then God is greater than our hearts. You don't seem to take in what I've done. I've sinned against the light. There was I, a Preacher of the Lord's Gospel, saved from Satan, knowing the truth, there was I giving myself back to Satan in fornication and murder——"

"Come, come—that last word's too much."

"It ain't. If I hadn't loved her, she'd be alive now. But my love killed her, because it was a sinful love that betrayed the innocent. Oh, you wouldn't believe the innocent lamb she was—and I took advantage of her innocence, her kindness . . . and now she's dead, killed by my sins. . . . O God, how shall I bear it! How shall I bear it! The memory of her is killing me. I must die."

"Don't speak like that. Remember you're a human soul."

"I'm a lost soul—who deserves to be lost, because I

sinned against the light. The Lord sent me a warning in a dream, but I wouldn't heed—I was blind and deaf with sin. Then he sent me another warning—'Repent ye and believe the Gospel'—but it was too late. All I could do then was to hurt her sweet soul—she cried, she suffered, because I abused her for her kindness to me. Leastways I didn't abuse her, but I said we were both sinners; and she couldn't understand. I couldn't convince her of sin, for all I was a Preacher of the Gospel—my power was gone. It had been taken from me because I misused it. I should have brought her soul to Christ, instead of which I brought it to Satan. Reckon I'm no better than Satan's pimp and bully. . . . I deserve to die and go to hell at once . . . not another day of life, even a life like this. And I can't live without my sweet girl; I want her, I want her . . . oh, don't think I was killing myself for my sins only, because I've lost the Gospel—but because she's gone, and I shall never, never have her. And oh, I want her—my little one, my little one . . . "

Mr. Bennet was shocked. He stood up, he took a pace across the room; then he came back and laid his hand on George's shoulder. He tried to make him drink some of the cooling tea; but the boy rocked himself, weeping, and would not be comforted. Then it struck Mr. Bennet that his frenzy might be relieving him—it might be what Dr. Gilpin called an "outlet," like Mrs. Millington's letter to the Bishop. George

too had picked a mandrake, a screaming root, screaming "Sin! sin! sin!" in his sick brain.

"I wish I could help you," he said brokenly, "I wish I could help you."

He was appalled at the abyss between him and George Heasman. What could he do for this young man who had stirred in him so strangely the half-unwilling feelings of a father? He could not give him the absolution that would have been the only possible medicine for his own soul. He felt all at sea, too, in the Calvinist's theological dilemmas. Why was he so sure that there could be no forgiveness for him? Why must he deny himself his right of atonement, of mending his life where he had broken it, of preaching the Gospel as a sinner saved?

"You ought to have let me finish it," wailed the boy; "oh, I was a fool not to have gone and drowned myself in the dyke. Then you wouldn't have found me."

"I should still have found you if God had meant it."

"I can't believe He meant it. I belong to Satan, so the sooner he has me the better."

"How can you speak like that? I refuse to believe that there's anything in your religion which countenances such a monstrous idea. Think of Theresa—how she would hate to hear you talking in that way."

"She did hate it—yet that was how I talked. Oh, I tell you, I made her suffer. I tried to convince her of sin, but she couldn't understand. The Lord had taken his word out of my mouth, and I had no power to save

her—my lamb, my darling one. Oh, when I think of her as I saw her then, all hurt and scared and loving, I feel there's nothing, nothing I wouldn't suffer to make up for what I've done."

"Well, your death wouldn't have helped her, but your life may."

"How?"

Once more the theological gulf yawned between them, and Arminius stared helplessly at Calvin.

"Can't you believe that if you give your life to God you'll also be giving it to her?"

George shook his head.

"There is such a thing," Mr. Bennet forced himself to continue, "and I'm sure it can be seen from your point of view as well as from mine—there is such a thing as a life of reparation."

"Not for me. How can I repair a thing that's dead? My life's dead—I've lost my girl and I've lost my Gospel. All I can do now is to sell tea."

"Well, you might make a very good reparation out of selling tea . . . but I'm quite sure you will preach again."

"I shan't. How should I dare?"

Mr. Bennet suddenly felt angry with him and his whole point of view.

"I think you're insulting the goodness of God. After all, your sin was chiefly a sin of the body, and I believe that such sins often count less with God than they count with men."

But George would have none of that.

"Reckon you don't seem to grasp the meaning and nature of sin. I've sinned against the light . . . and even if I haven't sinned unto death, I've sinned beyond anything that's allowed in a Minister of the Gospel. The Calvinistic Methodist Council would never admit me to the Ministry if they knew what I'd done, and I'd never feel right if I gained admittance without their knowing."

"But you can preach without being ordained a Minister. You were preaching at Providence all last year."

"I was given the charge. They'd never give me another charge now."

He sighed deeply, staring through the little window where the afternoon light spilled itself among pots of musk and geranium. He was calmer now, and the idea of preaching seemed to have taken hold of his sagging mind—at least enough hold for him to feel a certain pain at its abandonment. Mr. Bennet suddenly saw it as his one chance of recovery. After all, preaching had been his life for the last four years—his job in Cranbrook had been mere bread-winning, mere means to an end, and that end the ministry; even his love for Theresa had been a strange and brief experience, in conflict with the rest of life. His real life lay in those homiletic hours in the pulpits of Bethel and Providence, and in the dreams of which they were the crisis. He could never be happy as a small tradesman, never happy as a small farmer; even as Theresa's

husband he must have pined for the ways denied him. For the first time, Mr. Bennet saw George Heasman as a man who had received much the same sort of call as himself—different in its nature and authority, but none the less imperative. Experience told him it must be obeyed no matter what stood in the way. No sense of personal worthlessness must keep him from fulfilling it. George, like himself, was the victim of a vocation . . . If he was blind, then his eyes must be opened.

"Look here," he said, his voice shaking a little with the drive of his discovery—"I want you to forget I'm a Parson, and take my advice just as you would from a man older than yourself, who's had a lot of experience in the same line of business. My own opinion is that this reluctance of yours to undertake preaching, this exaggerated feeling of unworthiness, is simply another of the wiles of Satan, trying to keep you from obeying the Lord's will."

"You think that it's the Lord's will I should preach?"

"I do."

"A sinner who's sinned against the light?"

"We've all sinned against the light; and even taking for granted that you sinned as no other man has before—which I don't take for granted in the least—that only makes you more fit to preach the Gospel to sinners, to give them the good news of the forgiveness of sins. No preacher is worth anything if he preaches

any other way—as a sinner to sinners. I've long known that."

"Folk should look up to their preacher."

"Look up to his office and his message—not to him. How do you know that all this you've been through hasn't been a special call from God, to fit you better for your work?"

"I'll never believe it was God who tempted me to sin—to do evil that good might come."

"But don't you believe that he can bring good out of evil?"

"Not out of sin."

"Yes, out of sin. Have you never heard the words 'Oh, happy fault, which has brought us so great a salvation'?"

"That is strange doctrine."

"Not so strange as a sin which can never be forgiven. If there's one thing we preachers are especially prone to, it's self-righteousness, and I believe that is more awful in the sight of God than any sin—murder, adultery, any of 'em. So it's a happy fault that saves us from self-righteousness. *O felix culpa*——"

"Latin!" cried George, "I thought it was Latin. I knew it wasn't the Gospel."

"Salvation for sinners—isn't that the Gospel?"

"Yes, but not salvation through sin. I'd like to see what 'ud happen if I preached that sort of stuff in any chapel of our connection."

"Don't preach it in chapel. Why don't you go and

preach to the poor folk who never go to chapel? If the Council won't have you for a minister, why don't you go outside and preach to those outside; those the parsons and ministers can never reach?"

George looked thoughtful, almost as if he dreamed his dreams again.

"It's a work that wants doing," urged Mr. Bennet, on fire with his new idea. "Perhaps God has called you to it. Think of the poor folk, in the country as well as in the towns, who have never heard the good news of salvation—gipsies and tramps . . . "

"She said that," said George, slowly, "she said, 'Wouldn't it be fine to go and preach to the gipsies?' "

"Well, perhaps she's still saying it."

"No, no—I'll never believe that. No, she's saying nothing."

His manner had once more grown agitated, and Mr. Bennet banished Theresa's pleading ghost.

"There's your Gospel," he said, "your good news from a pardoned sinner."

"How do I know I'm a pardoned sinner?"

"Won't you take it from me?"

"I can't take it from you or from any man. I must have my own assurance."

"But can't I help you to your own assurance? You're very tired, and your feelings are as tired as your thoughts. Don't you believe that the voice of God can speak to you through a living man as well as through a text in the Bible? Wouldn't it help you

at all if I said 'by the authority the Lord gave me when he called me to preach the Gospel, I tell you that you are free from all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost'?"

As the end of the phrase became to him familiar, often-repeated words, his voice rang with a note that impressed George Heasman. He hesitated:

"I dunno. But I can't believe the Lord gave you any authority or called you to preach the Gospel. . . . But I believe that you're a kind man, and I've misjudged you. . . . Maybe the Lord has taught you things that he's hidden from my heart. I can't see no reason why his Word shouldn't come to me through you."

He bowed his head, and, still moved by that fatherly impulse, Mr. Bennet laid his hand upon it. For a moment they stayed thus; then George shied suddenly like a colt, and the hand fell.

VI. Mrs. Iggulsden (1st Battle)

I

FOR SOME LITTLE WHILE AFTER HE HAD LEFT HIM, AFTER HE HAD SEEN HIM SITTING WITH HIS PARENTS at a happier tea-making, Mr. Bennet wondered how soon he ought to go again to see George Heasman. Had he given him any help—apart from having turned him from death? And if so, ought he to water the seed with his sympathy, or leave it to germinate more sturdily alone? Just as he had made up his mind, two days later, to go over to Ethnam, the news came that young Heasman had left Kent. He had suddenly said that he felt much better, and had gone back to Newbury.

Mr. Bennet was hurt—this abrupt departure suggested a repudiation. George evidently wanted to forget the scene in Ethnam's kitchen, as well as the scene in Ethnam's oast, and to deny that one had brought him any more comfort than the other. He might at least have shown a little courtesy to the man who had shown him hospitality when he was an outlaw and had pulled him out of the grave just as he was going down into it . . . even if his efforts to give spiritual as well as material succour had failed against the hard casing of the young man's soul.

"I'm afraid he's a cub," he said to his wife. "I've always tried to think he isn't, but no sooner do I get a good impression of him than he behaves like a cub."

"You really can't judge him by his behaviour now. The poor boy's desperate. I've never liked him myself, I'm afraid, but I've always felt sorry for him."

"I don't see that you need. His misfortunes are his own fault and other people suffer more from them than he does."

He could not tell even his wife one of the reasons why he felt so deeply injured—of the wound given to the new-quickened sense of fatherhood that had moved him towards George . . . a daughter and a son—one was dead and the other despised him.

Then, a few days later, a letter came which changed his opinion, and made him see himself once more as an irascible old man who judged too hastily. George wrote from Oxfordshire, repentant of any neglect. He had suddenly seen that he must go, that he must get away from Kent where his presence was incriminating his parents in the eyes of Goldstrow, which still watched Ethnam from London. He must be able to think things over and make plans, and he must also keep his job and earn some money.

I don't think I shall stay on here. I would rather go somewhere else and I shall ask them to move me. So I must not offend them by stopping at home too long. Work will do me good, though it is only selling tea. I have been thinking a great deal about what you said, that maybe the

Lord has still some work for me to do. I have felt a powerful call in my heart to preach to sinners. Also I had a dream in which those words you spoke were given me: "O happy fault, which has brought us so great a Salvation." I fear that they are not in Scripture, but I can believe that as you say the Lord may sometimes speak to us by the voice of a living man. If ever I can, with a clear conscience, preach again I shall eternally give thanks and pray for you to the Father. But anyway I shall have to keep on my job, as I cannot ever be a salaried minister. But now I think it is better I shall not be, as I can speak more freely and to sinners as well as saints. Please accept my grateful thanks for your kindness to me in my misery. You have been very kind.

Yours in the way of His judgments,

GEORGE HEASMAN.

"Well," cried Mrs. Bennet, when her husband read out the letter to her, "I'm glad he appreciates what you did for him, but I really think he might remember what I did for him too. When he first came here that awful day, he put down his head on my shoulder and cried. It was me he wanted then, and his supper and his bed. That was what comforted him when he was at his worst. He seems to forget that his body once wanted comfort as well as his soul."

But Mr. Bennet now would hear nothing against George. He had entirely forgotten that he had once thought him a cub.

2

There were two postal deliveries at Delmonden Rectory, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, and

the afternoon brought the Rector a letter which wiped out all the pleasure and hope the morning had given him. It was now so long since he had heard Mrs. Millington's threat of writing to the Bishop, that he had begun to think it had not been carried out, or else had ended, as Dr. Gilpin foretold, in the episcopal waste-paper basket. But here was a letter blazoned with the somewhat recent heraldry of the see of Maidstone, and closing, as he anxiously turned the page, with the flourishes of a regional signature.

It began after the deceptively friendly manner of Bishops "My dear Mr. Bennet," and in between that and the "Yours sincerely, Herbert Maidstone," came much that the Bishop's chaplain had begged him not to write. "If I were you, my Lord," he had said, for he was privileged with his master, "I'd keep Mrs. Millington's name out of it. Her moral charges are, as you say, ridiculous, and if the others are correct, you'll deal with them more easily if he doesn't know she's interfered." But the Bishop had thought such evasion reprehensible. Tact sometimes had a way of appearing to him as double dealing. "Besides, he ought to know if his parishioners complain. One thing I have against these men is that they drive excellent people away from the Church, and one hears nothing about it, because as a rule nobody likes making a fuss. I think he ought to know that his practices are objected to, because I don't suppose any of his village folk would tell him."

So he wrote to Mr. Bennet:

Of course I do not for one moment consider these absurd charges. They are due to her suffering state of mind, which has given her, as is not unusual, a totally misleading view of the situation. When her grief has abated, she will come to herself and realise how much you have done for her niece and how much you, too, must have suffered on her account. But I feel I cannot quite so easily dismiss her complaint that in the midst of all her suffering she was unable to receive "the most comfortable Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ," owing to your custom of reserving the consecrated species in church, and consequent refusal to celebrate in a private house according to the plain directions of the Book of Common Prayer. Therefore I enclose a leaflet, which is a reprint of instructions issued to my clergy in this month's "Diocesan Gazette." I feel sure that I can rely on your loyal co-operation, and that the practices therein mentioned will be cheerfully given up by you. I have every confidence in a minister so experienced and devoted as yourself.

"Bah!" shouted Mr. Bennet, though there was nobody to hear. He was so angry that for a minute or two he could not trust himself to read the leaflet the Bishop enclosed. The "Diocesan Gazette" had come just after Theresa's death and therefore not surprisingly had been put aside unread. This leaflet would tell him the worst—would bring him out of the purity of great suffering and the dignity of Easter and Passiontide into the petty irritations of ecclesiastical controversy. Why couldn't they let him alone? And how had Mrs. Millington dared tell such a lie?—among other lies, no doubt, but the Bishop had had the sense

to disregard the others, whereas in this his prejudice had blinded him, and he would persecute—persecute . . .

The leaflet, when read, was found to consist chiefly in the condemnation of certain practices unknown to Delmonden; indeed some of them would have been condemned by Mr. Bennet himself, would he not, by doing so, have found himself in agreement with his Bishop. Only at the end was there anything bearing on the present case, and that was a paragraph stating that:

> The practice of Reservation for the sick is forbidden in this diocese. I know that certain of the Bishops have gone behind the recent decision of parliament and made rules which I consider *ultra vires*. In large industrial areas, or in big towns where there are many sick, special emergency regulations might be temporarily put in force; but Maidstone is almost entirely an agricultural diocese, and these considerations do not arise. I am prepared to listen to arguments put forward by the clergy of parishes of more than five thousand souls; smaller parishes will find, if they exercise the virtues of good will and good understanding, that the present regulations amply fulfil all need.

"Bah!" shouted Mr. Bennet again.

It was all ghastly, this atmosphere of petty warfare, which he had breathed so painfully in the first years of his ministry; to which he must now return after twenty-five years of sweeter air. True, he would not have to breathe it if he surrendered on a single point, but it was not in his nature to surrender. Apart from

his ingrown fear and mistrust of Bishops, the issue at stake was vital to his ministry. If he gave way, he was offending the little ones—putting stumbling-blocks in the way of the humbler, more ignorant sheep. How could he go to Mrs. Iggulsden and say that he could no longer bring her the Bread of Life, which she, almost alone in the parish, preferred to tabioca pudding? It would not help her much if he were to come laden with ecclesiastical paraphernalia, and attempt to perform a solemn liturgical service within the three square feet of space in her tiny, crowded bedroom. To do so would necessarily reduce her from a weekly comfort to a quarterly anxiety. . . . No, he could not ask her to endure so much—at the end of her strength, at the end of her time, when she had every claim to the kindness of the world she was leaving. . . . Somehow or other the Bishop must be convinced that she and one or two like her were as important as any five thousand souls for whom he might make emergency regulations. Bah!

Indignant, and still muttering, Mr. Bennet sat down to write a most unsubmissive letter to his diocesan, but he had not achieved more than a few lines when Mrs. Bennet came into the room.

"What's the matter, Harry?"

He told her, as he told her everything connected with the parish, though he had a theory that he never consulted her. She turned a little white as he spoke, and pressed her lips together. It was long, long since

they had had this sort of emergency, not since they had left the north. Her first words surprised him.

"Damn that wretched woman!"

"My dear——"

"Well, I can't help it. I've often thought it, and now I've said it."

"I'm glad you have. Up till now you've always taken her part against me."

"Oh, Harry!"

She looked at him miserably, and the letter he was writing. She regretted and resented what had happened—chiefly because of its effect on him—as he regretted and resented it because of its effect on Mrs. Iggulsden. Here he was near the end of his strength, the end of his ministry, with every claim to peace and kindness, being driven back into the old warfare that had harried his youth.

"Yes, you always made me truckle to her," he was saying, "but it was no use. Such a woman will have one's blood somehow, and now I wish I'd kept my dignity."

"I can't see that you've lost it by being patient. She really has nothing against you, and if the Bishop will look into her complaint——"

"He'll see it's all a lie. She never even asked me . . . not that I'd have . . . how dared she . . ."

"Harry, you mustn't get so angry. You're all trembling, and I'm afraid you'll——"

"Well, is it surprising? Here have I been minister-

ing in Delmonden for over twenty-six years, and not a breath of opposition until now, when a purse-proud woman demands I shall resign because she can't buy my soul."

"It isn't that, dear. Really it's nothing to do with the Church at bottom. She wants you to go because at present she can't bear the sight of you—you remind her of this dreadful thing she wants to forget . . . and I expect she's hurt, too, because Theresa chose to come to us, and died in our house. I think that hurt her terribly."

"That's just it. She knows she's been a criminal to that girl, so she wants to punish me."

"She'll feel better when she's come back from abroad. Then she'll probably see she's been unjust."

"Look here! I thought you said she was a damned woman. I'll hold you to that."

"I do hold to it. I think she's behaved unpardonably, but you mustn't make it worse."

"How can I make it worse?"

"By writing off to the Bishop in a hurry like that, without thinking it over or consulting anybody."

"I'm consulting you, ain't I? Even though you have no canonical existence."

"Well, I wish you'd consult somebody who has. Why not go over and see Mr. Barnes at Trillinghurst, or Mr. Smith at Witsunden?"

"They'd be no use."

"Of course they would. They've probably had these leaflets sent to them and will have to do something about it. You've often told me that the clergy ought to act together."

"And am I never to tell the Bishop about that woman's lies?"

"Yes, of course. But there's other things . . . anyhow, darling, don't write when you're so angry—please don't."

She could see herself as a young woman—wearing a dress that now seemed absurd, with a red and white striped bustle at the back—leaning over his shoulder as she was leaning now, and pleading with him in the same anxious, coaxing words.

3

He took her advice to the extent of postponing his letter till he had consulted one or two of the other clergy who were likely to be involved in the Bishop's declaration. A puzzle of country buses brought him first to Trillinghurst and then to Witsunden. At both the counsel was the same—"Don't start a fight."

"But he's started it," said Mr. Bennet.

"He hasn't. He's merely passed on a complaint which you can tell him is a lie, and sent you a leaflet which at the present moment is in every clergyman's waste-paper basket. Why don't you write him a polite,

stand-offish sort of letter, putting the facts before him, and saying that of course you'll study his directions most carefully and he can always count on your loyalty and devotion and all that sort of thing? That's what we used to do at St. Saviour's, Marlingate, and nothing more ever happened."

It was Witsunden who spoke, sunk deep in a garden chair at the corner of his tangled lawn, sucking at a pipe and really more interested in the doings of a missionary who was staying with him than in the crisis at Delmonden. The missionary had just told the story of how his flock had tried to poison him—describing, more flippantly than Mr. Bennet approved, how he had felt when he stood before the altar and smelled in his chalice the recognised fumes of a horrible death. "I'd never seen the church so full before—now I knew why, and I tell you I hadn't felt so hot and bothered in all my life. But I couldn't funk it—if I did I was denying the Presence to myself and to them. . . . So I made an act of faith and went through—and not even a headache afterwards, not even a headache. I took the cruet to our doctor to analyse, and he said there was enough dope in it to kill ten men. My! You never saw such a disappointed crowd as my congregation."

"We have too many poisoned chalices in England," said Witsunden, "poisoned with controversy—enough to kill ten churches. You know Blake's poem about the serpent who—

Vomited his poison out
On the bread and on the wine
So I turned into a sty
And laid me down among the swine.

And that's why—because so many good Englishmen go and do as the poet did—I'm advising our friend here to keep the peace."

"Peace can be bought too dear. I should lose my own peace of mind if I evaded the issue."

"But one has to evade issues in the Church of England. There are so many and most of them so footling that if we didn't evade them we'd never get on with our jobs. After all, our only job is to save souls, so don't let us be side-tracked into the marshes where Bishops boom and nothing else ever happens."

"It's because I know it's my job to save souls that I feel I can never keep the peace, as you call it. My people's souls are the issue at stake."

"But surely your people's souls will do better if you let the Bishop alone and he lets you alone."

"He won't let me alone."

"I tell you he will. He doesn't want to be forced into the open—he doesn't want to know what you're doing. He's been made to notice you, but he's only too anxious to let the whole thing drop. If you start an argument he'll have to take action of some sort. He'd much rather leave you to get on with your work."

"I don't believe it. My experience of Bishops dates back some forty years, and I tell you they're statesmen

—nothing but statesmen. They don't care twopence about souls."

"Some don't, I agree. But I think this man does."

"Then he's all the more likely to see my case if I put it to him clearly."

"The whole point is that he doesn't want to see it. If he does, he won't be able to turn his blind eye to you any longer."

"I don't want his blind eye. I want the truth."

"Well, if there's to be the light of truth in your parish, there's got to be a blind eye at Maidstone. That's the law of the Church of England—we may not like it but there it is. And I don't mind telling you that I'm being dashed disinterested over all this. Where you're breaking the law in one instance, I'm breaking it in six, and it'll be all the better for me if the Bishop drops on you. He can't run in every clergyman in the diocese who doesn't conform, so if you draw his fire he's all the more likely to let me alone. Since you've done me the honour of asking my advice, I can only repeat that the best thing to do is to write him a respectful, non-committal letter and simply let the matter drop—which it will, without a doubt."

But Mr. Bennet would not listen to the soothsaying of Witsunden. To him it was dishonour, saying "peace, peace," where there was no peace. After all, the young man had been a baby when he, Mr. Bennet, was fighting the northern wolf in shepherd's clothing . . . and he had been brought up in a new and frivo-

lous tradition that made fun of heresy and persecution. He and the younger clergy like him were of the same generation as the men who had joked in the trenches, who had made bitter fun of death and bitter jokes about dead men and the shells that blew them to pieces. He could never be the same as these young, disillusioned, faithful men. Their warfare was not his. . . . He left them talking about Father Somebody who was suffering miserably from an anchoress living in his church tower . . . miracles and anchoresses—and both a little funny; such an atmosphere was at once too rare and too profane for Delmonden.

4

Mr. Bennet went his own way. He would not shirk the issues, as he called them, to rest in the comfortable darkness of Maidstone's blind eye. Maidstone must be made to see—not only for his own sake but for the sake of truth—how monstrous were his directions in one respect at least. He must realise that worse than having one law for the rich and another for the poor, is to have the law of the rich only, for rich and poor alike. The first letter was a song of Mrs. Iggulsden, her piety, her sickness, and her sickroom; it digressed into the likelihood of Mrs. Body, too, becoming bedridden before long, and it ended with one or two regrettable remarks about Mrs. Millington. Altogether, it was not a wise letter to send an Episcopal

enemy, and Mrs. Bennet's heart might well sink when she saw it lying ready for the post. She had not been consulted or allowed to read it, and experience told her it was a bad sign when her husband fled her counsel.

Nothing was said by either of them till the answer came; then Mr. Bennet could not keep his indignation to himself. The Bishop simply swept aside Mrs. Iggulsden and her sick-room, and he did not give so much as a typewritten line to Mrs. Body.

Doubtless there are difficulties, but I feel sure that these can be overcome. I cannot allow one solitary case to upset the rule of the diocese. I have said that in parishes of over five thousand souls I am willing to make special arrangements, but the population of Delmonden is under five hundred and I cannot see that there is any need for exceptional treatment. I am sorry you saw fit to write as you did about Mrs. Millington. She has as much claim to your forebearance and sympathy as any poor woman in your parish. I sometimes feel urged to remind clergy of your school that rich people also have souls to be saved!

"Souls!" cried Mrs. Bennet, "souls! What does he know or care about souls? Why, he doesn't even notice 'em unless there's five thousand. Souls in bundles —souls at five a penny . . . that's how they go at Maidstone. While even a sparrow . . ."

Mrs. Bennet pressed his hand silently. She wanted to soothe him, but did not know how. He was taking it more hardly than he had taken his northern troubles.

He had been a young man then, and had gone into battle better armed. Now he was an old man, unable to fight as he had fought—though he would never own it. In her heart she did not want him to fight at all. Even though she was on his side, believing what he believed and loving what he loved, she wished he would surrender, despising herself for the wish. A true Christian woman, she felt sure, would have stood at his side and urged him on, not caring for consequences—not caring whether the fight maimed him or killed him because he was old and his arm had lost its strength and his sword its cunning. . . . She obviously was not a true Christian woman, only an old woman who loved her old husband, and wanted them both to end their days together in peace——

"Peace, peace, where there is no peace."

Her thoughts must have reached him, for she had not spoken. But they had lived so long together that even their thoughts had become part of the things they had in common.

"Peace—you all want peace. You want me to surrender, and that fellow at Witsunden wants me to shirk the issues. But I won't be a coward to please you or a humbug to please him. I tell you I'm going to fight."

So the fight went on—but not for long, because the Bishop had a weapon which the Rector had not had to meet in his northern battles. He was forbearing, and refrained from using it till he saw no other would

serve. Then he wrote and curtly told Mr. Bennet that he could go his own way, but if he persisted in his rebellion against diocesan law he could not expect any help from diocesan funds; in other words, his income would be reduced from three hundred and fifty pounds a year to just over one hundred and fifty.

But with this threat, he also sent a suggestion which might help the rebel to a more honourable peace. His chaplain wished he had held back the threat till his suggestion had been spurned, but again the Bishop could not bring himself to believe that tact was honest. He suggested that the special difficulties of Mrs. Iggulsden's case could be met by taking her the Sacrament straight from the Altar, after the celebration. This, he said, he was willing to allow, as it was a primitive custom, authorised in the Church since the Reformation, and not so liable to abuse as Delmonden's present way. In his opinion it would meet Mrs. Iggulsden's need entirely and at the same time conform to the law of the diocese.

As was only to be expected, the threat made more impression on Mr. Bennet than the offered compromise.

"So he's trying to starve me. I never thought he'd stoop so low as that. But of course he thinks a clergyman can always be starved . . . and most of 'em can. But he'll find I'm tough; he'll find I'm precious tough."

"Darling, we can't live on a hundred and fifty pounds a year."

"Are you turning against me too?"

"You know I'm not."

"But you're not standing by me in this battle I'm fighting for the Catholic faith, for my rights as a parish priest, and the souls in my charge. Think of all that—and yet you say we can't live on a hundred and fifty pounds a year."

"Well, can we?"

"Why can't we?"

"Because—because—" Mrs. Bennett's voice faltered as her hope became more and more ignobly centred on compromise—"it's been hard enough to live on three hundred and fifty, with this big house. We shouldn't manage even now if it wasn't for what people give us—everyone is so kind."

"And won't they go on being kind?"

"How can we expect it? If the Bishop puts the church 'under discipline,' I'm sure that a certain number of our people will dislike it and go elsewhere."

"Let 'em go. I don't want anyone to stay who worries about being 'under discipline.' I'd far rather have nothing but loyal folk round us."

"But if well-to-do people go, like the Cheesemans or the Ingpens, that means we'll never have enough to run the church on. Already there's a terrible difference with Mrs. Millington away ——"

"I hope she stays away, whatever happens. I never want to see her face again, however much she pays."

"Harry, I think you're being very unchristian."

"Because I won't compromise the Christian faith?"

"No—but the way you talk is so dreadful . . . darling, I can't bear you to be in a state like this. I'm not asking you to do anything against your conscience, and certainly nothing that would hurt dear Mrs. Iggulsden. But can't we at least consider this way out that the Bishop suggests?"

"It's no way out for me."

"I don't see why not. She wouldn't suffer—it would be just the same to her as it is now."

"It wouldn't if she was dying . . . and there are other people to consider besides Mrs. Iggulsden. I expect to have a number of sick cases next Winter—there are a great many old folk on the edge of breaking up; and Miss Bell is always ill. You don't seem to understand—you don't grasp that it would—would break my heart if a single soul in my charge asked for the Bread of Life and was denied."

His voice faltered, shaken no longer now with rage but with pastoral love and indignation. Her heart failed within her for the part that she must play.

"My dear, I do understand. Oh, please believe that I do. I'm only trying . . . I mean the chance of anything like that happening must be one in hundreds."

"I don't care if it's one in thousands; as long as there's a single chance. I simply daren't take it.

Don't you see that I'm answerable for these people to God—not to the Bishop? Besides, all this isn't really the point. It's a matter of principle as well as practice. If I give way, I deny the faith, I deny the rights, the obligations of my priesthood—if I give way, under threat. . . . Do you really expect me to write to the Bishop and tell him I can be bought?"

"No, of course not. But I don't see that he's buying you if you fall in with his offer. If you like you can suggest that it's only a temporary compromise."

His anger flared at her suddenly, as if she were an enemy seeking to betray his pastoral love.

"You don't know anything about it at all. This is a matter of principle—a matter of theology, and I do wrong to argue with you about it. You should keep out of all this sort of thing altogether—I've been a fool to let you come into it so much. I've often told you that, canonically, you simply don't exist."

"But I exist for all other practical purposes," she said, trembling and stiffening at his attack—"and I don't see how I'm to go on existing on a hundred and fifty pounds a year."

"You can do it perfectly well if I can. I'll never believe it can't be managed. After all, there are only two of us."

Mrs. Bennet suddenly and startlingly burst into tears.

"Yes, yes, I know there are only two, and you're glad there are only two; you're glad your daughter is dead, so that you can go your own way and sacri-

fice everybody and everything to your ideas, which are just pig-headedness and vanity if only you knew it. You—you make me hate religion when you talk like that."

"Lucy, Lucy!"

Never had she spoken to him so before, never had he been allowed to see the breaking point of her spirit. In dismay and tenderness his rage collapsed, and his arms enfolded her.

5

She made him so ashamed of himself, that he consented to do as she begged him and seek further advice. This was taken at Bulverhythe, where for many years his old Tractarian confessor had sat in judgment on the besetting sin. He seemed now to see the present crisis rather too much in terms of the besetting sin—he regarded the bought, ignoble compromise of Maidstone as an opportunity for its mortification; and being an old Tractarian, he insisted that the Bishop was acting within his rights. He saw certain difficulties but no treacheries involved by obedience, and he counselled his elderly penitent to accept the offer that had been made him and trust the God of Lowder and Stanton and Dolling to bring a fruitful harvest out of his wasted field.

"You must wait," he said; "we have waited for everything."

Mr. Bennet thought that he had already waited long enough, and was growing too old to wait much longer.

But he obeyed. The pressure against him was too strong. In his calmer moments even he saw that he and Lucy could not hope to live on a hundred and fifty pounds a year. True, he might resign his living, but it would be difficult to find another at his age, and with his Bishop's word against him; and his heart turned sick at the thought of leaving Delmonden. No, he must stay, and trust that things would change—some day, somehow, according to the hope of the Tractarian who waits for everything. After all, he belonged of right to the older, patient generation; he had little in common with the young men such as Witsunden, with their intrigues and their jokes and their sensations. It would profit him nothing to come out of his time and range himself with them—they would only misunderstand him. He would be like the bat in the fable, whom beast and bird disowned. He must keep his place among the old patient people. All this he thought rather sadly as he surrendered.

He surrendered, and nobody and nothing reproached him. The Bishop wrote him a thankful, fatherly letter, which rejoiced the heart of Mrs. Bennet, but which Mr. Bennet put in the fire. Mrs. Iggulsden did not know that anything had changed—he had carefully hidden from her the fact that an ecclesiastical battle had raged round the humbled needs of her soul. Her

ignorance, it must be confessed, was shared by most of the parish, for Mrs. Bennet had persuaded him not to make his sacrifices the subject of a sermon. The churchwardens and one or two others had done their best to understand the principles involved, but the rank and file of the villagers of Delmonden, preoccupied with such matters as the Spring sowings and the coming hay-crop, the state of their gardens, and the Summer's chances, were not likely to notice that, in a dark corner of Delmonden church, a lamp had been extinguished before an empty shrine. Indeed, one or two folk whom he had taught to pray there, still came, and he had not the heart to tell them that the shrine was empty. Their prayers certainly were needed still.

Even Delmonden church did not reproach him for the presence withdrawn. He had expected it to reproach him, for its shadows had closed like a womb over a mystery which, till restored by him, it had not known for nearly four hundred years. It was still as friendly, still as comforting—its old walls saturated with prayer and no doubt the memories of even bitterer disillusions. After all, it had lived through bigger changes and blacker compromises than this. The record of its clergy which hung at the west end—from Ranulph de Burghersh appointed, in 1282, by the monks of Battle Abbey down to Henry Seton Bennet appointed, in 1904, by Keble College Oxford—seemed cheerfully to reassure him that a clergyman

can swallow even bigger ecclesiastical pills than he had swallowed and yet thrive. One Walter Chulkhurst had apparently swallowed the old Missal of Henry's pious days, Cranmer's Christmas Game, the Missal restored under Mary, and Elizabeth's final compromise on a compromise; for his record had remained untroubled from 1538 to 1564. Through all troubles and changes he had been Rector of Delmonden, Sir. Indeed the Vicar of Bay made but a poor showing beside the Rector of Delmonden, and the Rectors and Vicars of many a village in Sussex and Kent, for whom continuity was territorial rather than doctrinal. Their ghostly voices seemed to cry to their successor: "That's the spirit!—the only spirit that prevails."

6

Summer came, and the swallows returned—wheeling and swooping over the low, yellow fields of the Rother, building in the rafters of Udiam, Wassall, Ethnam, and other farms, flying out through the dusk as though to fly behind the parting day, hunting the sun over the hills. Those swallows also returned which were Delmonden's special token of Summer—the visitors who every year brought their money, bustle, and news into the village. They did not all return, for the old Sweets were dead—they had died together in Bulverhythe workhouse, the winter's prey, and a warning to those clergymen who dare to be too poor. But Oreb

and Zeb were there, and the young folk who ate up Mr. Bennet's Sunday beef, and only one or two of them noticed that Delmonden's shrine was empty.

At the beginning of August, Mrs. Millington also returned. Mrs. Bennet's heart sank when she saw the clean curtains being hung at Goldstrow. She wondered how Harry would face it, and hoped that neither side would want to go on with the battle. But Mr. Bennet's spirit was cowed for the present. He was tired after his fruitless indignation, and more ready for peace than his wife had ever seen him—not, it is to be feared, any peace of active goodwill, but the passive peace that is preserved by negatives, avoidances, and evasions. Mrs. Millington, fortunately, seemed inclined for the same peace. She had been bitterly disappointed when she had found that she could not make the Bishop order the Rector to resign; but time and travel had abated the first violence of her resentment. She saw now that his conduct in the affair of her Theresa had been good as well as bad, and when on her return she found no gossip or scandal remaining —which meant that none of it reached her ears—she had the fairness to acknowledge that the Rector must be in some degree responsible for the good behaviour of his parish.

She also knew that though the Bishop had defeated her main charge, her side attack had won her a notable victory; and such knowledge softened her towards Delmonden church and its services which were so un-

like the services at St. Smaragdus, South Kensington. On the first Sunday of her return she came, and put a ten-shilling note in the plate. The churchwardens were jubilant, and Mr. Bennet hid his feelings.

The Summer passed, and all still went smoothly. Every week Mrs. Iggulsden received the Bread of Life, and in time even the dim reproach of Mr. Bennet's own heart grew fainter—as in other places where he looked for reproach he still found silence. The Rectory Garden Party passed off with its usual success. It seemed a little dim, a little haunted to Mrs. Bennet, who could not forget that at this very time and place a year ago Theresa's love story had begun its bitter course—had first come into the light, here under the stars and Chinese lantern. But no one else seemed to remember or to regret, unless it was Mrs. Millington, who this time kept away, though she sent cutlery and linen as she had done before. Mrs. Bennet almost could hope that the warfare with Goldstrow was ended.

The Autumn came; and with the first stripping of the hop-poles the Bennets went to Brighton. Up to within a few weeks of the time they had felt that they could not go back there, that they must find some other refuge for their remaining holidays. But as the day drew near with its established ceremonies, they realised that they were too old to change. It was too much toil and risk to think of a new place after so many years. They distrusted strange lodgings and

strange landladies, even any other journey than the old, familiar struggle through Hawkhurst, Tonbridge, and Lewes to the coast. It was all very well for young people to allow themselves to be swayed into new ventures by sentimental urges. But they were old, and habit was stronger than either romance or regret.

7

All through the Summer they had heard nothing from George Heasman. According to his parents, he was still at his work at Newbury, doing well, they said, and improved in health. Mr. Bennet sometimes wondered whether, after all, George might not live and die a grocer, plucking no more than his own soul out of all that had passed. In a way he was disappointed —and yet, he asked himself, why should he be disappointed? George Heasman's spiritual career was no affair of his. If he returned to his preaching it would probably be in some schismatic sect with doctrines at war with the truth. Besides, the less he heard or knew about George the better—having saved him from death he was better done with him. It was a pity that he still ocasionally felt the warmth of that fatherly impulse which once had moved him towards a misguided, miserable, bumptious young man.

Then during their second week in Brighton, in the calm shining Autumn of the sea, a letter came, redirected from Delmonden. It began rather unexpectedly,

"Dear Friend" . . . Mr. Bennet was surprised. He would never have thought of himself as George's friend, nor believed that George could think of him as his friend. But as he read on through the next few lines, he realised that the boy was writing in a state of high religious exaltation:

For long I have felt it would come, and now it has come. There have been voices in dreams, and Scripture given me. Once a man in the street said as he passed—"Two Timothy, four, two," and when I turned it up it went, as I expect you know: "Preach the Word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine," and just a verse or two further on it says "endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry." I was powerfully impressed by that, and then one morning, just as I woke up I heard Her voice, as I had never hoped to hear it again. She said with her own dear and beloved voice: "Go forth and preach the Word. God has called you to the ministry." I jumped out of bed and I fell on my knees, and at once a silver light seemed to shine round me, and I seemed to feel hands laid upon my head, and I knew that I was as much the ordained Minister of the Lord as if all the hands of the Council or of all the Bishops of the Crown and Church of England had been laid on me. Then I was as a man just waking out of sleep, with the tears running down my face.

There followed several complicated sentences in which George wrestled with the problem that he had apparently been converted twice. He solved it by denying the validity of his first conversion, when he had been

"deceived" by blindness due to pride and wicked self-esteem, which, if the Lord had not confounded, would have possessed me all my life. But the Lord used the very wiles and artifices of Satan to open my eyes and lead me to true repentance. My sin now is all wiped out and all my life is given to Him. I shall go from place to place preaching the gospel of forgiveness to sinners—in their halls where they will receive me, but in their streets where they will not. The idea has been given me that I can help support myself by selling tea and godly books, and I have been appointed agent of Milton's Teas Limited, also of the Protestant Grace Society. So I shall not have to make collections for myself, which sometimes gives wrong ideas. I would like to thank you, dear friend, for what you have done. For I know that the Lord has deigned to use your human flesh and blood as an instrument of his glory. As not only did you save me from death and certain hell, but you put into my head words that have borne fruit. I hope that you will feel moved to pray for me in my new life, and be sure that I shall not cease to pray for you, that the light of truth may shine upon you, and your earthly ministry of the imposition of earthly hands may be crowned by a heavenly call.

Your loving brother in Christ,

GEORGE HEASMAN.

"Well," said Mr. Bennet, "I scarcely know what to make of that."

"It all seems wonderful to me," said his wife. "But do you think Theresa really said that to him?"

"It doesn't sound at all like the sort of thing she would say."

"No, it certainly doesn't . . . but if George feels it was, and has been helped so much . . ."

"That's just it. I'm glad the boy's going to preach

again. When I saw him that time at Ethnam I felt very strongly that he had a call. I don't know why. . . . I see he's kind enough to suggest that I may have a call, too, some day."

"I hope he'll learn a little humility."

"It's a life that teaches it."

But in his heart he was more pleased than his words revealed. The miracle of a sinner saved, even with so exclusive and self-conscious a salvation, never failed to dazzle him with its recurrent power. The fact that this young man's experiences were outside the covenant, that his vintage was of the wild grapes and his harvest of the wild oats of the spirit, seemed only to give them an additional glamour in the eyes of the old man who all his life had followed the beaten paths of grace. He saw in them another miracle of the Wind which bloweth where it listeth, of the Rain which falls on the just and on the unjust.

"He'll talk a lot of stuff," he thought to himself; then added, "but so do we all." He felt much as a man who had begotten a son in his old age, a son whose name is Ishmael, whose birth is of the bondwoman not of the free.

8

Apparently George had written to others besides Mr. Bennet, for when they came back to Delmonden, they found the village full of his news. His parents were

not entirely pleased. They were sorry that their son had adopted a new means of livelihood as vagrant as his new religion—they feared that he might come to them for support just as on leaving Ethnam they fell into straitened circumstances.

"He'd much better have stuck by the Church," said Fred Heasman, "and the tea."

"He'll still be selling tea," said Mr. Bennet, anxious to point out some continuity in George's life.

"But after a strange fashion," said the father; "he was always a strange lad. Yet I can't understand why, if he wants to preach the gospel and sell tea, he can't have a chapel and a shop same as other folk."

The parish, as a whole, was divided as to the eligibility of young Heasman's choice. It was now rumoured that he had been a "fine, accepted preacher" up at Providence, but that being so, none could account for the fact that so few had heard him—except that Providence had always been considered a low place where only low people went.

"He'd preach about the Lamb of God, so as you could almost see the heavens open," said Mrs. Boorman of the Plough. "I ain't never heard him myself, but a young chap staying with us once had been to hear him, and he said he was wunnerful refreshed—not as I, being church, hold wud such manners of speech."

But Simmy Bourn, the old deacon at Providence,

who had heard George preach many times, testified against him.

"He hadn't given his heart," he mumbled; "he hadn't given his heart. And wunst when I wur setting there under him, I looked up and I saw an Eye watching him—I saw it wud the vision of my soul," he hastened to add, for his creed disapproved of miracles outside the Bible—"but it was an Eye all the same, watching him in judgment, and it said 'he speaks too much of brides and bridegrooms.' "

"Maybe his heart's broke," said Mrs. Breeds, "for losing Miss Theresa, and that's turned him to the Lord."

"He ought never to have thought of Miss Theresa. No converted man would have thought of her."

"No converted man would have done as he did."

"No, you're right there," said Mrs. Boorman, "if he did it."

"Surely, he did it," said Mrs. Breeds. "We all know that, though we don't speak of it, seeing as it hurts folk we look up to around here. I'm talking of the Rectory, of course, not the Manor."

"Well, I'll never believe he did it. Why, she wasn't that sort of girl."

"Then what was it she died of up at the Rectory?"

"Shame on you, women. Have done, do, wud your licentious talk," cried the old deacon. "Trouble about your souls that can still be saved rather than about the dead whose eternal lot is cast."

"Well, George Heasman's alive, ain't he?" said Mrs. Boorman, sharply, "and likely to make himself an unaccountable nuisance to us all if he comes down here preaching salvation."

But George, not surprisingly, showed no especial zeal to convert his native village. He set off on a circuit of Midland hamlets, and fell suddenly into silence. After a while his name dropped to where Theresa's still moved slowly down a dwindling stream of gossip, towards a dead sea of village memories.

9

Winter came swiftly that year. An October frost snapped the leaves from green to red, and blackened the roses that lingered in Delmonden gardens. Fogs hung salty and half-frozen above the Rother, putting chills into wood and tile throughout the valley so that folk went sick of the cold, with coughs and quinsies and aches in their bones. It was not surprising that when the Winter came in season as well as in degree, many old people were shut up in their houses, not to come out again till April's sun should melt the thin, green ice that scummed the brooks. Old Mrs. Body became bedridden, as Mr. Bennet had foretold, and one or two of her age—Grandmother Breeds, Sam Hilder of Moon's Green cottages, and the Dudwells' old aunt at Great Knelle—lost heart and became the burdens of patient, harassed youth.

The Pastor's work increased. The fields could lie fallow, and the contracting day shut the farms into dark hours of rest, but the Shepherd of souls must work all the harder, because folk were sick and idle and sinful with Winter's opportunities. The parish room must stand open and be visited every evening, so that his people could have some change from the Plough and their own kitchens. There must be Mothers' Meetings and Sewing Parties up at the Rectory, and in the morning, when the ploughman hugged himself in bed for another hour, the priest must rise as usual for the altar, going out into the blue, cold darkness, down an empty road, where the frost rang in the stones.

Mr. Bennet began to find then that the Bishop's law which had worked smoothly in the Summer, now involved much toil and contrivance. He had two or three old folk to care for, besides a few who were sick. Moreover, he found it difficult in those cold days to beat up a congregation. Miss Bell was ill, as usual, and the young and healthy had their work which made it impossible for them to come to church. If there was no congregation there could be no service, and if there was no service there could be no Communion for those bedridden at home. . . . The Rector tried to arrange for at least one person to be there every day, but it was a harassing business, and involved no little hardship to goodwill. Mrs. Bennet, of course, could normally have been relied on, but late in No-

vember she caught a bad cold, with congestion in one lung. It cleared up in time, but a certain amount of delicacy remained, and Dr. Gilpin advised her not to go out in the early mornings. She was distressed at being thus put aside when her help seemed specially needed.

"Really, darling," she said to her husband, "I'm able to come. It's cold out of doors, but the church is so warm—almost too warm."

"Yes, I'm afraid there's something wrong with the stove. I'm afraid we shall have to start collecting money for another. . . . But if the church is hot, that makes it all the more dangerous for you to go out into the cold air afterwards."

"I'm sure it wouldn't hurt me, and I need only come occasionally—when you're taking Communion to the sick. It won't matter so much if there's no service on other days."

"I've celebrated Mass every day since I came to Delmonden—not missed once till this Winter. It's not very comforting to think that after twenty-seven years I fail for the first time to get a congregation."

Mrs. Bennet refrained from pointing out how many times during those twenty-seven years, she alone had been the congregation.

"There's never been a Winter like this," she said; "it's really the most terrible Winter we've had."

"It was just as bad in '93, and we managed all right. I remember I had a server then."

"Yes, that nice boy Sharman—who did so very well out in Rhodesia. Well, dear, he's still to your credit as a good Christian man."

"But he isn't here. Why haven't we any good Christian men in Delmonden?"

"I'm sure we have plenty; but an agricultural community . . . there's nothing like farm work for making it impossible for one to go to church."

"Yes, yes," he fussed, "but up till now I've always been able to get someone. It's dreadful to think that now of all times this village must go unprayed for."

"Not unprayed for, dear."

"No, worse still—unpraying. Every day up till this Winter the village of Delmonden has been at my altar through the ministry of one of its inhabitants. It's said its morning prayer—now it's silent."

"Darling, I beg you to let me come."

"I won't let your health be destroyed for the sake of this godless village."

"Not godless—only cold."

"Cold and godless—all except a few poor folk who have to be sacrificed to the others' indifference. The Bishop makes his rules on the basis that this country's so full of religion that we have to guard against excess. If he were a parish priest he'd know different. Bah!"

In the end it was settled that Mrs. Bennet should come to church on days—and on such days only—

when it was genuinely impossible to find anyone else. If, on his arrival at poor little St. Thomas à Becket's, he found it forsaken, he would ring the bell, which she could hear quite plainly from the Rectory, and she would then come down and join him in empty shadows of candle-light. Meanwhile he would preach to the villagers on their duty to attend the Daily Sacrifice, so that it might be hoped they would make his wife's effort unnecessary.

"Of course," she said, "when it gets a little warmer, I shall start coming again regularly. You know how I love it; it's a great deprivation having to stop at home. But Dr. Gilpin was so very firm, and I do so want to get well. . . ."

The sermon bore fruit. After all, the villagers of Delmonden were good folk and fond of their parson. They were used to his religion, which had by now all the harmlessness of a familiar thing. It was only a question of ways and means . . . always a serious question in an agricultural parish. For over a month the altar was attended. Every morning Mrs. Bennet listened for the bell, for the call of little St. Thomas on its plaintive note. But it never came.

Then one morning she heard it—a frozen morning in January, with stars fading out of a sullen sky where snow hung ready to fall. On no morning could she have felt less ready. She had spent a wakeful night, and the cold seemed to have entered her very bones.

In the Gothic bedroom where she still huddled under the quilt, the cold seemed to lie like stagnant water, so that she moved her body against it and through it as she rose and went to the window.

She thought of ignoring the summons. Harry would not mind—he would hate her to come out if she really felt ill. But the next moment she remembered that he had a special need of her today. He was going to take the Sacrament to Mrs. Iggulsden and to Mrs. Body, and they would be terribly disappointed if he did not come. It would be no real privation for them to wait till tomorrow. . . . But tomorrow Harry had to go to Cranbrook to a meeting; he would not have time . . . they would have to wait two or three days if he did not come today.

Besides, greater than her sense of their need, was her sense of her husband's disappointment at being unable to fulfil it, with no doubt a recurrence of angry resentment against the Bishop who had put such a stone of stumbling in his pastoral way. . . . He'd be upset. . . . . He'd feel sore and sick and thwarted in his ministry. . . . She must go. Unless of course she sent Poor Emily. . . . But Emily could not be trusted to play her part in a service. Good as gold, she was denied no spiritual opportunities; but it was not within her power to represent the village of Delmonden at the altar. No, her mistress must go—it was her place, her duty, and, if she had felt less ill, her

pleasure. With stiff fingers she began to put on her clothes, which felt all chill and clammy with the cold.

10

It did not do Mrs. Bennet any good to go to church on a cold, early morning. She spent the next three days in bed, and on the fourth day she felt ill enough to send for Dr. Gilpin, who told her she must stay where she was for a week and learn how to take care of herself. She stayed for a week and for a month. At first her husband was not unduly anxious—he felt glad that she was being made to rest, and his mind was full of a less heartrending but more irritating anxiety about the church stove, which, after three days of volcanic misbehaviour, had collapsed altogether in the coldest week of the year. He had to go about collecting money for a new one, and when at last he had enough, he came home to find that he had a very sick wife.

She insisted that she was not really ill, that it was only because she had suddenly and unaccountably grown so tired that she had to keep in bed, that she would lose this cold which oppressed her throat and lungs as soon as the warm weather came. But before the ice had melted on the farmyard ponds, she died —going out on a February twilight, when the first lamb of the year was bleating at Wassall Farm. She heard its little voice, and signalled to her husband with

a smile and a nod of her head, as if to say, "the Winter's gone." On and on through the dusk he heard it bleating, after she had left him and he still sat holding her hand.

II

Her death was a thing unimaginable—both before and after it had happened. Somehow he had never thought that he would be the one to survive—not on any ground of reason but simply for lack of the power to picture himself without her. If he had thought at all of death for them, he had thought of them dying together, sharing the last illness or the last accident as they had shared the rest of life.

It was as difficult to imagine living without her as to imagine living without his own flesh and blood. Yet she was gone—her bed and her chair were empty, her footstep no longer sounded in the house, her voice would never answer his, however desperately he called. In her cupboard her clothes still hung—her bright-hued gowns and skirts and jackets, that he felt he must keep forever, because in them he could sometimes see at least the colours she had worn. She was gone—but he was the ghost. He haunted Delmonden Rectory, a disembodied spirit, seeking his lost flesh and blood. It was all unreal, as a dream, and sometimes he felt as if he must wake and find her, as he had so often found her after unquiet dreams, lying beside him

in her narrow iron bedstead with the morning light upon her face.

She was gone, and majestic words surrounded her—"light perpetual," "rest eternal." She had passed into rites and ceremonies, into traditional phrases and illuminated script—"Of your charity pray for the souls of the Faithful Departed." . . . He could never quite imagine her in such august company; she had always been so homely and so humble and so close to him. He could not even picture her without a "transformation" she had worn for the last ten years. . . .

Most terrible of all, he could not lose the habit of her in the house. Something within him that was too loving and too stupid to grasp even the plain dealing of death still expected to see her when he entered a room, and to find her waiting for him on his return from the parish. One March day when, crossing the Lomas brook, he saw that the first wild daffodils were out upon its banks, he stopped to pick them as he had done for her every year, and found he could not quench the thought of her delight. He brought them home, and threw them down in the empty house. "Emily, the daffodils are out—help me to put them in water." She came, and they arranged them together in jugs and bowls, setting them as formerly in the drawing-room and in his study, and as he looked at them he wondered why he had not left them growing by the water-side.

VII. *Mrs. Iggulsden (2nd Battle)*

I

EVERYBODY WAS KIND TO HIM. DURING THE THREE MONTHS THAT FOLLOWED HIS LUCY'S DEATH HE had more tokens of sympathy and love than he had had in thirty years. Everybody was kind, because everybody was sorry. In the village they said, "It's broken him up."

He did not know that his grief had laid such tragic marks upon him, because sometimes in his heart he felt that it was not really a tragic grief at all. Just as his love had expressed itself humbly in affection and tenderness rather than in passion, so his grief walked in humble ways of emptiness and loneliness rather than in despair. He felt it, less as a consuming pain than as an aching loss. He was like a man who has lost his right hand, and does not feel the pain so much as his own helplessness. He was helpless. His habit was devastated—the habit of the old, which had become life itself. Wherever he turned there were empty places, loose ends, a sense of frustration, strangeness, and loss.

Yet he stumbled on—he would not change his way. The Bishop wrote very kindly, suggesting that he should take a holiday and hinting that diocesan funds

could smooth any difficulties there might be. But Mr. Bennet would not go. He could not bear in his new helplessness to be away from his familiar house and village. Empty as it was, his house comforted him. He would not leave it—indeed he felt as if he would never leave it again.

He did not always feel as thankful as he might, or as he knew he ought, for all the kindnesses shown him. It seemed as if people did not understand what he really wanted. Young Witsunden, for instance, would come over in the evenings to sit and talk to him. It was very good of him to come twelve miles across country on his motor-cycle, to cheer the lonely evenings of a widowed old man. But Mr. Bennet did not want to sit and talk to Mr. Witsunden, to watch him sucking at his pipe, or to listen to his tales of ecclesiastical horror and imagination. He wanted to go to sleep. He wanted to feel the loving kindness of sleep steal over him, taking him into a world where there was no loss.

He found it difficult to sleep upstairs in his bedroom, where his bed felt so lost and lonely without hers beside it in the great cold space. So he would doze in his study from about eight o'clock till one or two in the morning, when somehow it seemed easier to go to bed alone, though he seldom slept much after he was there. If Witsunden came he felt harassed and frustrated. Yet it was kind of him to come.

It was kind, too, of Mrs. Millington to ask him to

tea. He was surprised when he read her letter, for though she had sent her condolences with everyone else on his wife's death, he had noticed nothing particularly at that time. Doubtless she was sorry for him, and wanted peace between them. At first he thought he would not go; then he thought he would. Lucy would have urged him to go, for she had always wanted peace. He remembered how again and again she had pleaded with him for his patience towards Goldstrow. She would be glad if, in the hidden place where she was now, she could know he was having tea there. . . . Besides, it might cheer him up to go. He often felt wretchedly lonely at his meals—sitting there trying to eat, while the stupid tormentor crouching just below his consciousness, expected her every minute to come in. . . . "Darling, I'm sorry I'm late —I was kept in the village." . . .

So he went up to Goldstrow, where he had not been since that dreadful day when he had seen the old woman in hell, and had struck at her there in her torment—he hated to remember. Now he too was in torment, and she held out her hand to him, and he took it almost gratefully. There was a community of suffering between them, in which they could meet almost as friends. They met with their hearts cleft with loss. The chasm in hers had been softened by the growth of many months, but he saw the darkness of it in her eyes as she greeted him.

"How do you do, Mr. Bennet? It's turned out finer than I expected."

"Yes, the wind's gone round to the east. I think we shall have fine weather now."

"Do you take milk and sugar?"

"Yes, please, both."

"I hope that chair isn't too near the fire. It's getting late for fires now, but I find it hard to bring myself to give up mine."

"I still have my study fire in the evenings."

"The evenings are nearly always chilly in the country, aren't they?"

"One is sometimes glad of a cool evening after a hot day."

"Will you have one of these cakes or some more bread and butter?"

"Thank you, I should like a cake, if I may."

"What are your views on the election, Mr. Bennet? Do you think the Conservatives will get in?"

"Not with any workable majority."

"No, I'm afraid not. A little more tea?"

"Thank you so much."

That was how they talked the whole evening, those two whose hearts were riven. They forgot all the dreadful, burnings things they had once said and thought about each other. Mrs. Millington forgot that she had held Mr. Bennet responsible for Theresa's death and had done her best to drive him out of Delmonden; and Mr. Bennet forgot that Mrs. Millington

was at the bottom of his parochial troubles, and had set in motion that disciplinary wheel whose slow grinding had crushed his home.

Or rather, if he remembered, it was with his mind only. All the hot coals of indignation that she once had kindled were buried so deep under the slag of the past three months that he did not feel their heat any more, though he could dimly recall how once they had tormented him, and wondered why they did so no longer.

After tea she took him out into the garden, and showed him her flowers, picking him a big bunch of roses to take back to his empty house.

2

There was one friend whose presence always comforted him, a friend who did him no kindness save to be always kind; and that was the old woman, Mrs. Iggulsden. He went to see her nearly every day, taking his sick mind to visit her sick body. He had begun to do so very soon after Lucy's death, because on his first visit to her after his loss it had been such a comfort to sit there and talk, or be silent, and never force his mind. He had built up, almost zealously, another habit, cultivating its growth there among the ruins of the old, like a tree growing up in the breach of a fallen city. He would call in to see her on his way home from visiting in the parish, late in the morning,

when her room and her bed had been made tidy by her daughter-in-law. He would tell her all those things he would have told Lucy, so that, when he left her for his own home, his mind would not be heavy with an undelivered burden.

She did not advise him so freely as Lucy had done, because she naturally knew less about his business; besides her mind was shy of the heights of his vocation. For Lucy he had never walked on heights—indeed, he remembered poignantly there had been times when he had felt obliged to remind her that though in one sense they were both miserable sinners, in another he was set apart from her by apostolic grace. But Mrs. Iggulsden would always listen sympathetically to everything he had to say, which after all was what he chiefly wanted, and would support and respect him in the ways he had chosen, which was more than he could have counted on from Lucy.

Their chief talk, however, was not of the parish and its ways, but of the dead—their dead. For Mrs. Iggulsden had a husband and a daughter and two sons in the place where Lucy was. They would talk over their dead, as they had lived, and as they were now. They would wonder and picture together, discussing those points, so many that they were almost a cloud, on which both Scripture and the Church were silent. "Where are the dead and with what body do they come?"

Peering into that invisible world, guessing and con-

jecturing with the simplicity of unquestioning faith, they were like two children who, their heads together, peer through the keyhole of a dark room. An added thrill was given to their guessing by the knowledge that before long the secrets of that room must be revealed, that the door would open, and first one and then the other of them be summoned into the mystery. Neither had the slightest fear or even a thought that on the opening of that door they might find only darkness.

"I can't understand," he would say to her, "how it is when I know I must go to her so soon, that I feel so terribly lost and lonely without her now. After all, we can't be parted for more than a few years."

" 'Tis the flesh crying out in us—the flesh that wants flesh, I reckon."

"But we shall meet in the flesh—'whom I shall see for myself, whom mine eyes shall behold' . . ."

"Not this flesh of ourn—that's tired and has its own place to go to. Our bodies soon grow tired, and the earth wants them. You know how the psalm says—'O let the earth bless the Lord, praise him and magnify him for ever.' That's when she gets our bodies back, which belong to her—and reckon our bodies are sometimes unaccountable glad to go."

"Hers wasn't. She loved her life, and her heart was a young woman's still."

"But her flesh wasn't a young woman's—reckon her flesh was glad to go, reckon it was beginning to get

tired of her soul. I sometimes think our bodies doän't understand our souls, and are afraid of them. Our souls doän't always treat them as kind as they should ought, and our bodies want to git shut of them and lie down—'as a beast goeth down into the valley to rest' . . . you know the words."

"But what is she if she isn't what I loved? I loved her body."

"You loved what her body was trying to tell you about herself, but often our bodies are like beasts what doän't understand their riders, and her body could never tell you all that she is, all that you will know some day."

In these conversations it was nearly always he that questioned and she who answered. He felt sometimes very humble as he sat beside her. To all the questions which he sent aching into heaven she seemed to find her answers in the earth, and he felt comforted by her similitudes as a man is comforted who lies down upon the earth.

3

His great and growing fear of those days was that she too would soon be leaving him, who was the last of his dearest friends. Now Lucy had died he found that he expected everyone to die . . . saw every home broken into and every love laid waste. In this case there was more than his own nervous reaction to the

shock of death; he had true grounds for his fear. During the Winter her health had been steadily declining. For years she had been neither better nor worse, but this last cruel Winter had worn her down as it had worn down others. When Spring and Summer came they did not restore her; instead of making mere casual visits of friendship and enquiry Dr. Gilpin came to see her regularly once a week. She was growing thinner, and her breathing laboured. He feared the strain on her old heart.

Mr. Bennet watched her with an anxiety that he constantly betrayed. She would reproach him, almost mock him for it.

"Dear friend, how long do you expect me to live? And how much do you reckon my life's worth to me?"

"It's worth a lot to me—as much as my own to me—more."

"Doän't talk such larmentable stuff. I'm old enough to be your mother, as I've told you before, and folks must learn to lose their mothers. You äun't an old man yet to my way of thinking and you'll surely mäake many more friends."

"None like those I've lost."

"Maybe not—'tis läate. But see, we mustn't be brooding. We must learn to look forward to our day. And since we're talking of these things, I want you to have summat of mine to remember me by when I'm gone. If you'll look over in my bower you'll see a dentical liddle box wud a picture on it. My mammy

brought me that box from Tenterden Fair when I wur a liddle bit of a girl, so 'tis middling old. I thought maybe you could carry the Sacrament in it to sick folks. Go over and look at it."

Mrs. Iggulsden's "bower" was a bamboo table covered with a coloured cloth on which were set out various small treasures that were literally all she had in the world. It had originally been called her "shrine" and arranged in honour of a little wooden saint that Mr. Bennet had given her when her illness had banished her from church. But soon her tongue had fallen back to its natural ways of speech, and the saint had been dwarfed by her other possessions, including a large green tea-cosy shaped like a parrot which towered hideously above a mixed collection of china ornaments, photographs, flower-vases, decorations of a Christmas cake, and strange objects made of beads and shells.

The little box was painted with one of those curiously flat Victorian conceptions of a rose, magenta against a blue ground. It was not likely that it could ever be used in the way she intended.

"I've näun to give folk but things," she said, rather plaintively—"no money. I only cost money now. All the money I'll be able to leave Ted and Ivy and the children ull be the money they'll säave when I'm dead. But I've got something for each one."

"I shall always value your gift. But I hope it will be long—very long—before it's mine."

She only said:

"I'd lik to think my liddle box was carrying to other folks the same tender comfort as you so often bring to me."

He no longer had his old anxieties about bringing her this comfort; because ever since Lucy's death the Bishop's compromise had worked with an unwonted smoothness. His altar had seemed almost miraculously attended, and he sometimes wondered whether a religious revival were at work in Delmonden.

In reality what happened was this. Mrs. Sayer or Mrs. Breeds or Mrs. Gasson would see him going down the hill in the early morning, and cry out:

"There goes our Passon on his way to church, and maybe there äun't anyone to answer back for him. You run, Ernie"—or Fred or Mabel or Tom or Sidney —"and see if he wants anyone to answer back. I'd go myself if he wurn't so mortal slow and I'd never be home to git the children off to school—he do just about täake his time these days, poor soul."

They were all sorry for him, and they all knew how much he had always depended on his Lucy for a congregation—good woman that she was, going up and down and that hill a dunnamany times a week, just to see as the Lord's table was served. So, out of kindness, they saw that his Eucharist never went in want of an Amen. That which he had tried in vain to make them do for the love of God they would do at

last for the love of him, even though it was true that he did just about take his time.

He had grown inconceivably old and fumbling in those few months. He had never been swift, never like those young men at Witsunden, and Trillinghurst, whose soft gabble and quick professional gestures bewildered their congregations—"shooting räound on us lik an oast-cap in a gale to say 'the Lord be with you,' and then before as we had time to collect our wits, turning his back on us and going on wud summat else." Mr. Bennet had never earned such criticisms from his flock; indeed during the last few years even some of those slow minds had begun to find him slow.

Now he was not merely slow but as an old man lost. He had always been a little dishevelled at the altar—old clothes and old vestments of an outrageous Tractarian cut had not been easy to wear neatly. But now he was nothing but a bundle, shuffling out of the vestry with bent shoulders, huddled into his white fool's robe, with his bonds hanging loose from waist and wrist, and his yoke askew upon his shoulders, and his cross crooked upon his back—"Surelye, Ernie, you should ought to go in and help dress un. He'll trip over himself one of these days." There he stood—old, crumpled, bundled, harassed, and fumbling, trying with one hand to set the book upon the stand while the other adjusted his spectacles. But as he fumbled there his heart was proud and his spirit stood erect.

In that one hour of the day nobody need have pitied him.

Standing before the altar he knew his own power—power over life and over death, that could not fail. Away from the altar, he might grope and stumble, and find himself the questioner of simple souls and the pensioner of little kindnesses. But here he was the Priest, offering all questions and all kindness alike to God. He even touched his Lucy's death with power. He was no longer her poor widower, who could not eat nor sleep without her, but her priest, her mediator, who had power to reach and help her, and bring her with himself and all souls through death into life. It was the supreme reward of his ministry that in his darkest hour he should have this power in himself, and never feel himself so consciously a priest as now when, in the sight of all men, he stood as a victim.

4

That Summer he again had news of George Heasman —not personally this time, but through other people. The young man's parents had now left Ethnam for a small grass farm over by Canterbury, but they still kept up loosely certain correspondences, and one morning Mr. Vidler of Reedbed Farm had a letter from Fred Heasman with a cutting from an Essex paper.

Mr. Bennet had come in to consult his churchwarden about the Garden Party.

"I don't feel equal to running it this year . . . I mean it would be difficult . . . so perhaps . . ."

"I plainly see that, Sir."

"Well, Mrs. Millington has very kindly written to offer her grounds for it."

Mr. Vidler's face underwent a passing spasm, but he answered:

"That seems a middling good plan, Sir—if folks ull go."

"Why shouldn't they go?"

"Goldstrow's a bit of a step from the village, and maybe when they git there they wöan't feel so free . . ."

"But I don't see where else we're to have it—and I always meant . . . I always hoped that one day she'd take it on. After all, the Rectory garden isn't very big."

Mr. Vidler struggled to find words that would express the satisfaction of all Delmonden with the Rectory garden up till now, but would also convey the people's realisation that their Rector's loss would make it difficult for him to entertain them this year, and at the same time proclaim their willingness to be entertained by Goldstrow, with a hint of their profound sense of Goldstrow's inferiority, coupled with a complete readiness to do anything he liked in any way whatsoever. His face changed slowly in colour from an apple to a plum—then he gave up the effort, and

produced Heasman's letter by way of a complete change instead.

"He's been gitting his näame in the päapers, that young feller from Providence. His dad has been sending me a piece out of a päaper, wud a lot in it all about young Heasman, such as we'd never expected."

He handed Mr. Bennet a cutting from the "Essex Advertiser." It was headed:

"A New Evangelist. Remarkable Scenes at Riversedge," and began:

For the last three nights the Advent Chapel at Riversedge has been crowded, on account of the visit of a young Evangelist, the Reverend George Heasman. It appears that Mr. Heasman is already well known in the Midland Counties as an eloquent preacher, but this is his first visit to Riversedge, where the Advent Christians have invited him to hold a Mission in their Chapel. Though the Mission was primarily intended for Advent Christians only, it has led to a general revival throughout the town, people of all denominations flocking to the Chapel, and crowding the Penitents' Form at the end of the services. The Evangelist is still a very young man, with a remarkably earnest manner. His message is quite undenominational, being chiefly a call to repentance, with a solemn assurance of the sinner's forgiveness. This he gives in a most impressive manner to each separate penitent. The Reverend Mr. Heasman intends to conduct a preaching tour through the whole of the south of England. Next week he will be in Kent.

"'In Kent'—did you ever hear the like of that, Sir? Maybe he'll be coming to convert us next."

"I don't suppose he'll ever come here."

"I shouldn't be anyways surprised if he did. He wur always an uncommon cocksure lad, as ud think näun of teaching his betters. But for many reasons I should advise him to keep out of this pläace."

"He won't come—I'm sure. But I'd like to hear him preach."

"You hear him, Sir!"

"Yes, I should like to . . ."

"He'd never speak sense such as a gentleman and a clergyman lik yourself could listen to. I know young Heasman. Not as I ever heard him preach"—the churchwarden suddenly remembered himself—"but folks ud tell me as he wur always on the rant, wud sense as rare as Kentish hops in Kentish ale. He'd mäake you feel ashamed of him, Sir, and of yourself for being there."

Mr. Bennet said no more about hearing George Heasman preach, but he still thought about it, and after a little while—he never did anything quickly now—he wrote to him at his parents' address, and asked him if he would be likely to come anywhere near Delmonden.

George answered at once. He would be coming as near Delmonden as Goudhurst, where he was engaged to speak, at the Gospel Hall, about the middle of August. He sent Mr. Bennet a ticket, for it was possible that without it he would not be able to get in.

I have been wonderfully accepted since I started my tour seven months ago. I have been all over Bedfordshire, Hert-

fordshire, Essex and Hunts, speaking mostly in halls and churches at the invitation of Christians, but sometimes in market-places and cross-roads. I take no money, as I make enough by selling books and tea, and Christians are always willing to give me bed and board when needed. I feel wonderfully happy, set free from sin, and spending my life in setting others free from sin, teaching them that even sin itself can be a way of knowing God. It is a teaching I have often had censured by the orthodox, but souls eat it up greedily. I am attached to no religious denomination. I thought of founding a church of my own, but then I thought better be free.

He enclosed a ticket which was merely a piece of paper with "Admit bearer to good seat" written on it, also a price list of Milton's Teas. He had so far grown in forbearance as not to enclose the prospectus of the Protestant Grace Society.

"Tstck, tstck"—Mr. Bennet clucked his tongue—"Seems as if Vidler was right and I'd be a fool to go. But I will go. I want to hear him. He sounds as if he was sure to preach some abominable heresy . . . thought of founding a new church, did he? He'll tell us next that he thought of dying and rising again. He absolves sinners, does he?—'solemn assurance of the sinner's forgiveness'? Ha! ha! He got that from me. He's got everything from me. . . . But he's got back his soul. He owes body and soul to me. I gave him both that day. He's my son. But not the son I wanted. . . . I never wanted him. I wanted her—Theresa; and all because of him and his wickedness

she's dead. I don't want him; but there he is—my son."

5

That same evening he settled himself as usual in his study, and his mind walked in the quiet ways of sleep; where though he did not meet his Lucy, there was no sense of parting, no consciousness of loss, but a gentle warmth as of sunshine on a wall. He slept in his armchair, his hands dropped between his knees, his head fallen sideways towards his shoulder. He would have slept like that for hours, with drowsy half awakings, till the increasing cold roused him to seek greater ease for his body in bed, had not a sudden knocking startled him out of his dreams, and made him sit up, heavy and bemused.

The knocking was repeated. He could not realise yet what had happened. He looked round the room —his study; so he had not gone to bed. Was that Emily knocking to wake him? Had he overslept himself? Dead ashes on the hearth, and stars in the blue window showed him that day was still far off. The knocking came again and this time he knew that it was not on the door of his room, as he had at first supposed, but on the door of the house. Someone was knocking at the front door in the middle of the night. He must be wanted in the parish. He must go at once.

The sense of urgency tore away the last of his con-

fusion. He stood up and went as quickly as his stiff legs would move him to the house door, drawing back the bolts. Outside stood a familiar figure—young Iggulsden, the old woman's son. Mr. Bennet suddenly became broad awake.

"Hullo, Iggulsden, what is it?"

"It's mother, Sir. She's been taken bad. Doctor says she won't last out the night."

A terrible spasm contracted his heart. So it had come—that other loss. Oh, he might have been spared a little longer, allowed to recover himself for a brief space after the first blow. But the personal pain scarcely twisted him for a moment before it was swallowed up in the pastoral pain.

"I'm coming—at once. She wants me, doesn't she? Is she conscious?"

"Yes, Sir. She hoped as how you could bring her the Sacrament. It ain't properly her day, but seeing as it's for the last time." . . .

"Of course she shall have it. I'll fetch it at once."

Then he felt the sweat break out on his forehead. He had not been quite awake after all—he had forgotten. . . . For a moment he stood silent and staring. He had never envisaged this. He could not take Mrs. Iggulsden the Sacrament because it was not there.

"It's her heart," young Iggulsden was saying, "but we never thought it ud take her so soon."

"No—never . . ."

"Are you coming, Sir?"

"Yes, yes. But wait a minute—I must fetch. . . . Quick! Come in, Iggulsden, and sit down in the hall. I shan't be a minute. Quick."

He was muttering "Quick, quick" under his breath as he hurried back into his study. It was there he kept his portable Communion set, with the little Cowley altar, that had been given him years ago in the famine days of the North. He had always kept it ready for use, though he had not used it for years—no one had seemed to want it except Mrs. Millington, and she had not asked for it. . . . Now Mrs. Iggulsden must have it, though she had not asked for it and she did not want it; she must have it because he himself had deprived her of the easier way. Hot tides of anger went through him as he moved and fumbled, awkward with his haste. Yes, he himself had deprived her, her shepherd . . . at the bidding of his shepherd. Howl, O ye shepherds, in sackcloth and ashes. . . . He had wakened now from something more than sleep—from the drugging apathy of the last six months, when his heart had lain sick and gentle within him, drugged with grief. Now this touch upon the hidden wound of an old strife had brought to life a whole sequence of ideas and emotions that for long had seemed dead. Once more he knew what it was to be thrilled with anger, and in that anger he met again something that was almost his old self.

At last he was ready, had seen that everything was

there and in order. He came out of the room staggering under a slight burden that he scarcely felt.

Iggulsden took it from him.

"What is this, Sir?"

"My portable altar. I must celebrate."

The man said nothing. He scarcely understood. Then when they had walked a little way he asked:

"Is that what she wanted, Sir?"

"No, I'm afraid it isn't, but it's all I can do. You see I don't keep the Sacrament in church any more. The Bishop ordered me to give it up, and I obeyed him. I used to take her Communion straight from the altar, so that she didn't know there was any difference . . . and I never expected this to happen."

He had never thought she would go suddenly, without warning, she who had lingered so long over her farewells to life. If ever he had pictured the Sacrament needed in haste, it had been for someone else, someone with more impatient gestures towards life and death, the victim of some sudden stroke or accident. She should have gone gently, faded sweetly, not suddenly cried to him like this: "I must go. Give me Food for my journey."

The night was moonless, but swimming with big stars that glittered in the black sea of the sky, and moved through the tossed branches of trees that overarched the lane, in and out of the waving briars of the hedge. The wind blew keenly up the marsh, but, though he had come out hatless, he did not feel the

cold. For one thing they were walking so fast—hurrying—with a haste that echoed on the clinkers of the lane, and rang more flatly on the smooth, tarred surface of the village street.

"Is the doctor with her?" he once asked.

"Yes, Sir—he's doing all he can."

"But he doesn't think she'll last long."

"No, Sir, I'm afraid not. Poor Mother!"

"I don't suppose she's sorry to go. She was very tired."

"I reckon she was—but we shall all miss her terrible; she was an uncommon sweet soul."

They walked through the blind and dark village nearly as far as the church, then turned off into the cottage-row of Mount Pleasant. A light shone in an upper window—the only light in dark Delmonden. Young Iggulsden opened the door, and as he did so, Dr. Gilpin came quickly down the stairs.

"That you, Bennet? Thank God! She's been asking for you."

"How is she?"

"Sinking fast."

The words contained an echo. Mr. Bennet saw himself meeting Dr. Gilpin a year ago in the Rectory drive. . . .

"Can she last twenty minutes?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. You'd better go up at once."

Mr. Bennet walked up the small, crooked staircase,

led by the candle-gleam into Mrs. Iggulsden's room. She was lying flat in the bed, her face waxen, her eyes closed, the sheet drawn up to her chin. She looked already dead. His eyes met Iggulsden's across her.

"Mother," said the girl close to her ear—"he's come."

The blue lips moved—"Thank God."

Mr. Bennet looked anxiously round the room. The bed, a cupboard, and a chest of drawers already filled it to congestion. No space to set up his altar here. Then he saw to his infinite reproach that they had prepared a corner of the chest for the Sacrament they supposed that he would bring. They covered it as on former occasions with a clean white handkerchief, and set on it a vase of flowers with a sixpence laid beside it —her humble offering. His heart swelled with mingled grief and anger that was almost physically painful.

"I'm sorry—dreadfully sorry—but things will have to be a little different this time. I couldn't bring the Sacrament. I haven't got it. But I will celebrate at once. . . . Iggulsden, are you there?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Give me that case . . . where can I set up the altar?" He gazed anxiously round the tiny poke of room and passage, then through an opposite door—"Is there room in there?"

"That's our bedroom, Sir."

"It looks bigger than this . . . Yes, I think I can manage. Help me, please."

They all looked bewildered. They had expected

something different—this was all new and strange, and harassing among so much bustle and affliction. He wished that he had explained things more clearly when the changes had been made at the church. He had told them a little, but they were simple souls, and the ways of ecclesiastical controversy were strange to them. Now they must be martyred.

"She won't hear you, I'm afraid Sir, across the passage, and the children are in bed."

"Never mind. It's all we can do. And we must make haste."

Then the woman in the bed spoke faintly:

"Have you brought it?"

His heart constricted, and he had to clench his hands to keep his self-command. He stooped over her, and moved by a penitential impulse, kissed her damp forehead where the dews of death were gathered.

"No—I could not. But I will bring it soon. Please wait for me, my dear."

Then he hurried across the passage into the other room.

Here were two huge beds, in one of which the children lay sleeping. They did not wake as he and Iggulsden set up the altar, and he put on the thin silk vestment he had not worn for years. He had no cassock, and he was aware that his trousered legs must look rather ridiculous. There was no particular decency and order about this last rite—none of the dignified simplicity with which he had ministered to her

on other occasions, and with which he would have liked to bid her now Godspeed.

But he must not stop to think or to regret. He must be quick; in case death grew impatient, as well he might in the face of such a sorry gesture from the living. He began the service, speaking in a loud clear voice that he hoped would reach her in the other room, till he realised that if he spoke loudly he would also speak more slowly. He must hasten—gabble—in case she died before he had finished. He must reduce the service to the bare bones of the essential. He must hurry—hurry—hurry, for death was coming and would not wait. He was racing death. Unfortunately he had not the habit of racing; when he tried to be quick his tongue stumbled and his hands fumbled. . . . He had never before had such a consciousness of performing a magical rite—mumbling, mumbling, so that he might make here what he had been unable to bring with him. Mumbling, mumbling . . . and all the while she was hastening on her way. She could not wait while he struggled with a long-winded formula. Death was calling her, while he was only mumbling. . . .

Out of the corner of his eye he could see young Iggulsden on his knees behind him. Queer shadows moved over walls and ceiling, as the candles wavered in the draught. A child whimpered in its sleep. He suddenly heard a voice, "Has the doctor gone?" Then came hurrying footsteps. He knew now that he was too late—Kate had come in, and whispered to Igguls-

den, who rose from his knees. They both went out, leaving him alone.

He was ready now. But he knew that he was too late, even before he heard the son's voice say:

"She's gone, Sir."

Howl, O ye shepherds, in sackcloth and ashes. . . . Trembling, he placed the water she had not received upon the little emergency paten. Then he went into the other room and looked at her. She did not look very different from when he had seen her last alive—waxen, with blue shadows round her mouth. Her mouth was curiously sucked in, into a queer secret smile, such as an old woman might wear who knew more than her neighbours.

6

She was dead, his dear old friend of many years, and gone without his Godspeed. He wondered how much she had understood of the last half hour—his coming, his going, his not coming back. She had welcomed him gladly, but she had seemed bewildered when he went away. Had she left the world bewildered, wondering why her shepherd had denied her the comfort he had so often brought before? He could not bear to think of her in ultimate perplexity. Tears smarted in his eyes as he thought of her setting forth with a reproach in her heart for him—no, not a re-

proach, she was far too gentle and too loyal for that, but a question.

Kate Iggulsden was on her knees beside the bed, crying quietly with her face hidden. Her husband stood with his honest red face working like that of a child who is just about to cry. For long minutes nobody spoke. Then Mr. Bennet said:

"I'm sorry."

They looked at him in silence. Even now they did not understand what it was all about.

"She won't be any the worse—wanting anything she needs, poor soul?" ventured the son at last.

"No," he said slowly, "thank God. There's another shepherd—a good shepherd."

Silence came down again, and he knew that he must pray. His lips moved:

"The Lord is my shepherd: therefore shall I lack nothing."

He heard them joining with him—

"He shall feed me in a green pasture: and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort. He shall convert my soul: and bring me forth in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me: thy rod and thy staff comfort me."

Thank God! Thank God! No matter how cruelly the strife of shepherds might have kept her from the pasture, there had been one to lead her forth, whose

rod and whose staff had comforted her, going before her into the shadows. . . . She shall not want.

But he said in a loud voice:

"This shall never happen again in my parish while I'm alive."

He could not bear to stay any longer, so he said one or two commendatory prayers, gave his blessing to the living and to the dead, and turned to go. As he moved, his eye fell on Mrs. Iggulsden's "bower," lit waveringly by candlelight, and more steadily if more dimly by the first dawn now showing white in the window. He saw the little box with the coloured rose, and picked it up.

"She wanted me to have this. May I take it now?"

"Surelye, Sir. I've often heard her say she wanted you to have it."

He carried it into the next room, and in it he reverently placed the wafer which the dead woman had not consumed. Then he slipped the box into his breast pocket, holding it safe and close to his heart with his left hand, while he moved about, helped by Iggulsden, packing altar and vestments.

"Perhaps you would kindly bring these things back to the Rectory any time this morning. I can't take them now. I'm going to the church."

The man promised, and held the candle at the stair-head for Mr. Bennet to go down. At the door, Dr. Gilpin's car had just pulled up, with the parish nurse, whom the doctor had fetched for the washing and

laying out of the dead. They both greeted him, but he scarcely spoke; he brushed past them into the pale street, where the dayspring struggled with the last of night.

The church roof loomed black and steep against a sky slatted with primrose. It was barely ten yards from Mount Pleasant, and soon he was fumbling with his key in the vestry door. An unearthly silence hung over the village and the marsh. Then suddenly a cock crew.

He had the door open at last. . . . It had been difficult in the darkness, with his shaking hands. Why did his hands shake so? His whole body shook—yet he felt strong, almost fierce, as he moved in the darkness, groping for the matches he knew were there. At last he found them, and helped himself to lamplight. Then he opened the small safe where the church vessels were kept, and took out the long disused ciborium. It had been kept bright and clean, ready for use. . . . Now it would be used again, used as long as he breathed. . . . He would write to the Bishop and tell him so. Yes, even Witsunden would say that he must write to the Bishop now. Write and fight. . . . No matter how old—never too old to fight. His old warlike spirit lifted its battered crest, it snuffed the air and in his heart was a dreadful, disloyal exaltation because now there was nobody to stop him fighting. . . .

He carried the ciborium into the church, placed the

wafer within it and restored it to the aumbry that had been empty for a year. He lit the lamp that hung before the shrine—a seed of light in a great womb of darkness. Then he slipped Mrs. Iggulsden's box back into his pocket; once at least it had been used as she intended. The shadows were about him as he knelt to pray, lifting his face to that small dayspring, which seemed to grow smaller as outside the east window the dawn grew, piling pearl on grey, and saffron on pearl, and flame on saffron. The cocks were crowing—no longer in solitary reproach, but in united expectation. A wan and terrible light swept into the church, smiting away the shadows. From distant places came the shapes of benches, pillars and an ageless font.

His body still was shaking. He tried to pray, but he had no words, scarcely thoughts, only a burning anger and grief.

7

The Bishop's chaplain said:

"I hear on all sides that the poor old fellow's gone to pieces since his wife's death."

The Bishop's mouth softened, but his eyes remained hard.

"He's gone back on his word."

"But at least he's had the honesty to write and tell you."

"What else could he do? I was bound to hear sooner or later, and naturally it's better for him if I hear his side of the question first."

"Yes—quite so; but——"

The chaplain hesitated. Theologically he was on the Bishop's side, but practically he thought there was something to be said for Mr. Bennet. Anyway, he was an old man and a broken man; why not allow him to end his ministry in peace? It probably would not be long before he died, or was forced by illness to retire; and then—the living was in the Bishop's gift, he could put in whom he chose, and all the defiance and trouble would be ended. But his superior was speaking——

"It's a plain question of truth and falsehood. It seems to me that his attitude conveys an altogether false and depraved idea of God's mercy. I've told you many times that I regard this form of religion as a definite throw-back to pagan conditions."

"He's an old man, and at his death the problem will solve itself automatically."

"He's not so very old—not seventy yet. He may live another ten or fifteen years. I must think of his parishioners."

"None of them has complained hitherto."

"I beg your pardon. One of them complained last year. Doubtless others would complain if they had the courage—or were not so ignorant. There's often a lot of hardship silently endured in these extreme par-

ishes—and I'm afraid, in this case, he's not only extreme but violent—quite violent in his methods. You should have seen the letters he wrote me last year."

"I did see some of them—he certainly doesn't pick and choose his words. In what style does he write now?"

"The same. He seems obsessed by the practical aspects of the case—can't see the legal or the doctrinal side at all—only the practical. It's nothing but 'Mrs. Iggulsden,' 'Mrs. Iggulsden'—I'm really quite sick of the poor woman's name. But read it yourself and judge."

He pushed the letter across to the chaplain, who saw at once that Mr. Bennet's handwriting had changed if his style had not. It wavered up and down the page, sharp and thin, with many missing words. To the younger man, all the defiance of the contents seemed to spill itself and be lost in those gaps of missing words.

"He's old," he repeated lamely—"that's an old man's letter. I wish you could leave him alone."

"I wish I could. But really it would be weakness. There's something more at stake than an old man's peace of mind."

"He's sinning rather out of excess than defect."

"I quite agree, and of course I'm terribly sorry for what has happened. I'm always sorry to think that any Christian man or woman should be denied the Sacrament in the hour of death. But it can't always

be avoided, and I simply won't believe that it can make any difference. The poor woman's soul is none the worse, whereas many souls may be the worse for what he is doing now. I shall certainly write and tell him that if he will not desist from his illegal practices I shall do what I threatened to do in the first instance—hold back his grant from the Diocesan Funds."

"This time I doubt if you will be as successful as you were before. The old chap's wife is dead, and I understand it was she who refused to live on a hundred and fifty a year. Now he's alone, he'll probably attempt it."

"He'll be a fool if he does."

"I'm afraid he will try."

The Bishop looked troubled. He had no wish to starve Mr. Bennet and had only flourished his threat in the assurance of its efficacy. He could not bear to think of the old man going short of such meagre comforts and essential decencies as are to be bought for three hundred and fifty pounds a year; but neither could he bear to think that a doctrine he regarded as pernicious should receive even a temporary asylum in his diocese. His high, fine brow contracted, and for a moment his eyes wavered into the softness of his mouth.

"I'll go to see him," he said at last—"I'll go and reason with him as a father. I won't command. . . . Yes, that's the more excellent way. I shall win him by tenderness as a father in God."

"I sadly fear you won't."

"Why not? If he's old and unhappy he's all the more likely to respond to a little sympathy. We Bishops are often too prone to act as foremen rather than shepherds. I shall approach him as one shepherd another. . . . He'll respond to that, I feel sure. I won't ask him to come here—it's a long way for an elderly man, and he probably can't afford the fare. Look at my engagements for the week after next I know I haven't a minute before then—and see if I can't squeeze out a couple of hours just to drive over."

The chaplain, searching through the crowded pages, found a clear afternoon about a fortnight ahead. But he could not share the Bishop's hopes.

"It's a case of conscience with him," he said, "just as it is with you; I think you'll find him more obstinate than anything you can possibly imagine."

"Well, I shall have done my best, anyhow—and I've more faith in human nature than you have. Please write and make the appointment with him."

The chaplain turned away, murmuring under his breath:

"When an irresistible force meets an immovable mass . . ."

8

Mr. Bennet was surprised to receive from his Bishop a kindly worded letter announcing his intention to

come over to see him on Thursday, the eighteenth of August, at half past two in the afternoon. "Then we can discuss together this matter that is troubling us. Meanwhile I ask you to pray for me that I may be guided aright, and that a solution may be found for our difficulties."

This seemed to the old clergyman a most welcome sign of hope and grace, and he began to congratulate himself on the success of his tactics.

"It's what I always said—show a firm front and they'll give way in the end. They can't stand up to the truth. Oh, I was right to do as I did. If only I'd done it earlier . . ."

Meanwhile, all was quiet in the parish. None made any protest because of the shrine restored. Mrs. Millington was away, or possibly the peace would have been broken. But Mr. Bennet felt more than a match for Mrs. Millington. His old warlike spirit was in him again, but not quite in the old way. He was like an old motor car, which had been put aside after an accident, and now once more is taken out on the road. It dashes along at something very like its former pace; but the fact that it makes more noise than ever is not a good sign. At first Mr. Bennet thought it was—because he no longer felt dull and mild and listless, but excited and argumentative, he felt sure that he was better—better and happier, in spite of his new loss and the self-reproach it had brought him. "I feel more

myself again," he would say, at the end of a talk with Witsunden, or Dr. Gilpin, or Mr. Vidler.

One day Dr. Gilpin brought him up a little bottle.

"What's this? I'm feeling ever so much better now —I don't need any more tonics."

"It's not a tonic. It's a sedative."

"I don't want a sedative."

"My dear old friend, you want one very badly. Take this for the next week or two, and keep as quiet as you can."

9

Shortly before the day fixed for the Bishop's visit, George Heasman came to Goudhurst as he had said. He was to preach on one night only, at the Gospel Hall, which was a hall attached to the Independent Chapel. Mr. Bennet was glad it was to be in a hall. Neither he nor the old Tractarian at Bulverhythe would approve of his attending worship in a Nonconformist church; but a hall involved no precise dealings with schism, and thus he was able to hear George preach with a clear conscience. Which was just as well, for he was determined to hear him and would have sacrificed his conscience rather than his opportunity.

He had a late tea instead of supper, and caught the bus at the end of the Rectory lane, driving to Goudhurst by way of Benenden and the Brogues. He was feeling a little tired when he arrived, for the summer

night was warm and the bus was crowded. On it he had detected more than one of his parishioners, for though he had not meant to tell anyone of George's intended visit, the news had leaked out, either through his inadvertence or in some less likely way. Young Heasman was not popular in Delmonden. His connection with Theresa's death had never been made a certainty, but it had flourished powerfully as a supposition, and the general trend was to distrust this new, strange flowering of a rotten tree.

The Gospel Hall was a large building, barn-like in its outlines but piously florid in detail, standing close to the Independent Chapel on the outskirts of the town. Already it seemed full, and if Mr. Bennet had not been able to show his ticket, he would probably have had to stay outside. As it happened, he was given a seat in the front row, whence even his short-sighted eyes could hope to see the preacher's face. Opposite him was a high rostrum, crowned with a Bible and a glass of water, with the scroll of a text mounting the wall behind it; from where he sat beneath, all he could see was "Judgment."

A vague murmuring and shuffling filled the close air. People were trying to find seats, were greeting neighbours, were exchanging hopes or memories of the preacher. Mr. Bennet sat very stiff and upright, his stick between his legs with his hands folded upon the crook of it. He felt and looked a stranger. He was not used to this sort of thing. A phase of village

life was opening before him which, though he had always known of it, he had never encountered. No church gathering would have been quite like this. It would have been socially more mixed—the manor and the villa attending as well as the farm and the cottage—it would have been more respectable. Here was no higher rank than a small farmer or two, and though there was the usual core of pious respectability, there was also an uncommon periphery of dirt and rags—a couple of tramps off the road, sitting together munching stale bread out of a brown paper parcel, and here and there little knots of gipsies, staring and whispering. All these people, judging from scraps of talk that came to his ears, knew about George Heasman, and in some cases had heard him preach. He must be well known on the roads, in that under-world of the countryside where the Church and established Nonconformity have no footing. He had indeed gone into the highways and hedges preaching to sinners. . . . Mr. Bennet saw yet another wild fruit of the garden seed he had sown.

Nobody spoke to him, and he spoke to nobody. He felt a little out of place, a little on the defensive. Though in a sense all this was his own work, he did not really approve of it. The proceedings lacked that quietness and dignity with which for him true religion always went habited; he was conscious of no supernatural contacts or even expectation. Crude sights, crude sounds, held his thoughts to earth. They

could not mount to heaven on the Scriptural baroque which was the place's only ornament—whirling and flying scrolls of texts, Promises, Judgments, Blood, Fountains, Jerusalem, Lamb of God. He stared at them unedified as they spread their curves upon wall and cornice, sprawling over doorways, swelling between windows, so full of a queer movement and roundness that every letter might have been a flying cherub and every scroll a cloud.

The door behind the pulpit opened, and George came in. At once there was a hush, in the midst of which a woman's voice rose shrill and sudden—"Hallelujah!" Mr. Bennet turned round indignantly to stare at the interrupter, but nobody else took any notice, and the preacher seemed entirely unmoved. He stood slowly turning over the leaves of the great Bible, his eyes dreamy under frowning brows. He looked stouter, comelier, and ruddier than Mr. Bennet had ever seen him, and when at last he spoke his voice seemed almost musical with health.

The service opened with prayer—a queer, unedifying yet compelling prayer, at which nobody knelt, during which all the congregation shuffled their feet and scraped their chairs, coughed, hauked, blew their noses, yet which somehow conveyed an almost disturbing sense of devotional expectancy. It ended in a chorus of Aymens, and one determined Hallelujah from the woman who had shouted before. Then they all settled themselves for the sermon.

Mr. Bennet had not, of course, heard Heasman preach in the old days at Providence, and his delivery was rather a shock to him. It might have been a shock even if he had, for young George, no longer tempted by a distant view of the ministry, had ceased to trouble about such things as grammar and accent. Six months on the highways had broadened and coarsened his speech. The drawling Kentish tones smote strangely on ears used to Oxford and Cambridge in the pulpit. For some time, indeed, the Rector found the discourse difficult to follow. George committed over and over again the gravest sins of oratory. He held down his chin and muttered, he threw it up and shouted to the roof; he babbled for long periods, the words tumbling out of his mouth; then suddenly he would pause and stammer, passing a sunburnt hand across his forehead, pushing back his forelock of bleached hair so that a white line showed above the healthy red of his brows; sometimes he waved his arms in meaningless gestures, or he would suddenly stamp his foot so that the timid among his congregation started like hares. It was all very trying, especially as in time, when the preacher and hearers had warmed alike to their business, his broken periods were cut up still further by Hallelujahs, Aymens, Selahs, and Glory Be's. Mr. Bennet did not like it at all. He sat stiffer than ever, his eyes fixed on the preacher's face. He saw that the face was transformed, full of a light which was not in his words nor in his thoughts. Moreover,

as he looked about him, he saw that light also reflected in the faces of the congregation. A power was at work which did not lie in the eloquence of the preacher nor even in the message that he brought. A queer sense of motion seemed to have come into the room, as if not only the texts upon the wall, but the bodies and minds and souls within it were all moving, moving in curious flight. There was life, life, life everywhere . . . the life of the wind. He felt as if he were assisting at some uncouth rustic Pentecost, had been caught up into an uncharted movement of the Wind that bloweth where it listeth. In time, his heart ceased to exclaim, though it was still amazed and a little disgusted.

The matter of George's sermon was not more reassuring than the manner. He brought home his message of forgiveness to sinners with the story of his own sinful life, vomiting out his most secret experiences with the painless ease of a babe at the breast.

"There was I, a pious young seller of tea and candles, my Mam's and my Dad's good boy—never once I forgot to kneel beside my bed every morning and evening and say the prayers my Mam had taught me. My one desire in life was to be a Minister of God's Word, and I put myself through some unaccountable stiff training—yes, I did; I tried to talk like an educated person, like a real young undergrad, just laik this, ah did. But I never could manage it, for the Lord had other things in store for me. Oh, I was a presumptuous fool, I reckon, thinking I was saved, when

I had no real assurance, when sin had a root in my heart like a dandelion. . . . I might have been now as I was then, smug-faced and lost, if the Lord had not stooped in his mercy to my misery, and saved me. And how do you think he saved me?—By a searching discourse? By a meeting with one of his saints? By a little child's leading? No, dear brothers and sisters, he saved me by none of these things. He saved me by a new, dark, strange, and terrible way. He saved me by sin—from sin. What d'you think of that? Saved from sin—by sin?"

Mr. Bennet felt himself blushing for George, as he went on with his story, hinting at the nature of his misdoing, or at least its roots in the flesh—"a crushing, staggering, smiting sin of the heathen. None of your pious sins, but a sin of blackness and darkness and burning lust." He wondered if his part in the sinner's restoration would be enlarged upon. But he appeared in the story only as "the voice of a living man." There followed a theological argument to account for the apparent failure of Scripture. George left the whole thing suspended in mid-air, and went on to describe his growing sense of salvation, the spreading light, which reached its fiery zenith in the flash where "a dear dead girl bade me know myself as God's minister. I heard her dear voice say—'The Lord has called you to his ministry. Go and preach the Word in the highways and hedges.' And as I knelt in awe and wonder, I felt—I swear as I stand here before you all

that I felt—living hands laid upon my head, and a living voice proclaimed me a Minister of God. I am pledged to carry the glad tidings of salvation into the highways and hedges, to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and bid them come in to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

The rest of the discourse was taken up with an account of the glories of that marriage feast, and an exhortation to his hearers to become partakers of it with the Saints in light. His style was less broken and changeful now, his speech seemed to combine and to flow, carrying along the Aymens and Hallelujahs that were cast upon it as stones upon a torrent. Mr. Bennet could feel all round him that men were praying. Part of the motion in the hall was the motion of prayer, and suddenly it became a physical motion, bodies rising up in different parts of the building, bodies pressing and struggling down tight rows of eager bodies, crushing up the aisle, scrambling up on the platform, where the preacher stood with arms spread out, blue eyes solemn and blazing.

"Oh, my dear brothers and sisters. You cannot refuse this loving invitation. The Bridegroom speaks, he calls you—'Come! Repent and believe the Gospel.' Through the dark night, in the miry lane, he calls you and his arms are waiting for your soul, as a husband's arms wait for his wife, his erring wife. Oh, think of your soul as an erring wife, how she goes creeping down the lane, to where she sees the lamp set in the

cottage window—the lamp of his love that never goes out day or night, but is set in the window to beckon and guide her home. She comes, the erring bride. She has only to knock—no she hasn't even to knock, for the door is open. The Bridegroom's arms are round her, and as she lays her head upon his breast and feels his forgiveness rain in kisses upon her brow, that poor erring forgiven beloved soul can scarcely refrain from crying—'O happy fault, which has brought me so great a salvation!' "

The preacher took out a large coloured handkerchief and mopped his face. Then he fell on his knees, praying silently, while his body swayed. An elder announced a hymn and a collection.

10

Quite a third of the congregation was now crowding to the platform. The sense of motion all round him was so strong that Mr. Bennet could not help wondering why he was not moved. He felt strangely apart, and surprised, and a little repulsed. He picked his hat off the floor—it had already been trodden on. There was no use trying to speak to George, though he had wanted to speak to him. He had better make the best way home he could. Then suddenly he heard young Heasman call his name.

"Mr. Bennet, Sir!"

He had jumped down off the platform, which was

now crowded with penitents, and his huge sunburnt hand seized the Rector's in a grip that hurt.

"Kind of you to come, Sir. I'm unaccountable glad. I hope you had no trouble in getting in."

His old manner of defensive truculence was completely gone—indeed, if anything, he spoke with a touch of deference, as a young man to his elder.

"No trouble at all," said Mr. Bennet, "thanks to the ticket you gave me. How are you getting on? But I needn't ask."

"Fine, ain't it?" beamed George; "it ain't often you see a sight like this."

Mr. Bennet had never seen anything like it before, and George was well aware of that.

"All penitents, that is," he continued—"and now I must go and give the message to each one. But I'd like to have a talk with you sometime, Mr. Bennet. May I call around and see you one of these days? Seeing as the Lord made use of your human flesh and blood to bring me to the light, you should ought to know how I'm getting along."

"I would certainly like to hear. Are you staying in these parts?"

"Till next week. Then I go into Sussex. The Church at Burwash has invited me to preach among them."

"The Church?"

"The Church of the Redeemed, not the Parish Church. Maybe I could call and see you on my way.

I take the Rother Valley train from Northiam on Thursday."

"Then come and see me—have a cup of tea. Will that suit you?"

"That will suit me fine—and now I must get along. My sinners are waiting."

He leaped up on the platform to interview in one evening as many penitents as Mr. Bennet had had in twenty years. The old parson made his way out, thankful for the fresh air and the stillness of the street.

II

It was not till some days later that he realised he had asked George to tea on the same day he was expecting the Bishop. But, he reflected, it was not at all likely that the Bishop would stay to tea. He was coming at half past two, and probably the interview would be over in half an hour; there was not much to be said—anyway, not much that could be said with profit. He would see the Bishop in his study, and tea should be laid in the drawing-room.

For nearly twenty minutes before his visitor was due to arrive he sat waiting. He sat by his writing-table, erect and strung. He had not thought yet what he would say. Somehow, whenever he had tried to think of it, words and ideas had danced off together, and he had come to himself far away from it all, wondering whether he should plant sweet alyssum instead

of violas in his borders next year, or remembering painfully that he had not corrected the proofs of the "Parish Magazine"—and had he written to the Universities' Mission about that preacher they had promised to send? It was always in the midst of such a question that he awoke, with his own particular question still unanswered.

Not that it mattered much, he told himself. The less said the better. And the fact that the Bishop was coming to see him meant that he had virtually surrendered, otherwise he would never meet him on his own ground, but would have summoned him to Maidstone. All they had to do was to consider ways and means . . . and he would be magnanimous, he would give way on any small details, though in essentials he would be firm as a rock—the rock of the universal, undivided Church.

The Bishop came punctually, and Poor Emily showed him in, spinning round twice before him in the doorway like a hen before a chasing car, crying "The Bishop, my Lord," in a hoarse, awe-struck voice.

Mr. Bennet rose to meet his Father-in-God.

"It's very, very good of you to come," he said politely.

"My dear friend," the Bishop patted Mr. Bennet's shoulder with his free hand, "I am so very glad to see you. I ought to have come before, to offer you my personal condolences on your great loss; but a Bishop's time, you know . . ."

Mr. Bennet bowed. He offered his visitor a chair, and they both sat down.

"About this business," the Bishop began at once—for he had to be in Maidstone again by five for a meeting—"I told my chaplain I felt sure we could come to some friendly settlement if I saw you personally. Letters are always unsatisfactory in a case like this."

Mr. Bennet agreed.

"I feel sure, my dear friend, that you do not mean to pit your individual opinion against the law of this diocese."

"It is not my individual opinion, my Lord, but the opinion of the undivided Church."

"Not of the Church of England."

"Surely the Church of England is a part of the undivided Church."

They had rushed into the argument up to their necks, and for some time they floundered in it like hasty swimmers who are being carried too far out to sea. They had about the same theological equipment, for the Bishop's D.D. was honorary, and, like Mr. Bennet, he had always been too busy to read much; they also had the same amount of practical experience, though unfortunately of two quite different kinds. By the time they had scrambled back on to the rock of plain fact only one thing had been settled and that was that the Bishop had not come to Delmonden in any spirit of weakness.

"Certainly not, Mr. Bennet. I am absolutely unable to make an exception in your case. My only reason for coming personally is that I would rather try to persuade you by friendly argument, than issue my commands through the post."

"I am afraid that even you, my Lord, cannot persuade me to go against my conscience in this matter."

A little of its first friendly bloom had worn off the meeting.

"But, my dear man, your conscience allowed you to obey me nine months ago. Surely the doctrine of the undivided Church has not changed since then?"

"No, but I have been shown—shown in a very terrible way—how wrong I did in giving way to you."

"How can you have done wrong in giving way to your diocesan Bishop?"

"Because through doing so I have denied the Bread of Life to a soul that asked for it."

The Bishop's mouth relaxed into a parenthetical concern, though his eyes maintained their hard, dogmatic brightness.

"I agree absolutely that that was a most unfortunate incident, but I think you are seeing it out of its true proportion. After all, this woman, this poor dear woman, suffered no permanent loss. You surely don't believe that she did."

"No, I don't. But she suffered all the same."

"Suffering is a good discipline for us all."

"But at my ordination I was not given any special authority to inflict it."

"My dear Mr. Bennet, don't talk so wildly. I tell you that you're seeing this thing out of all proportion. Besides, it's not a misfortune that is ever likely to occur again. You have a tiny parish. Probably nobody else will die suddenly in it for many years."

"There's old Mrs. Body—you know her, you met her at the Confirmation—she may go any day this Winter. Besides, it isn't that—you don't understand . . . if there's a single chance of a single soul in my parish wanting the Sacrament and not getting it . . . why, I've failed as a minister, as the shepherd of my flock. I've disobeyed my Lord's commands to feed his sheep."

"But do you expect him to judge you for what is not your fault? You can't do more than your best, and surely no loving Master will require it of you. My complaint against your school of thought is that it often encourages false ideas of God's mercy."

"It's not God's mercy I'm thinking of. I'm not thinking of myself at all, and my own judgment. If I fail, I fail my ministry. I fail the Church."

"But if you fail because you have obeyed the voice of the Church speaking to you through your Bishop?"

"The voice of the Church does not always speak to me through my Bishop."

"Then how does it speak?"

Once more they were wetting their feet in that peril-

ous theological sea, but this time they shrank from wading farther into it. Hastily drawing back they turned to the familiar shore of the concrete and the personal.

"Will you tell me exactly, Mr. Bennet, how many sick communions you have weekly in your parish?"

"There's only Mrs. Body at present . . ."

"The present will do."

"But I must think of next Winter. There's always two or three old folk that take to their beds in Winter, and I have besides, Mrs. Hilder, who I'm afraid is drinking herself to death—she can't last much longer."

"Do you propose to take the Sacrament to a woman who is drinking herself to death?"

"Yes I do, poor old soul, when she's dying. She's a very devout churchwoman—used to be most regular up till about a year ago, when this started. It began as a medicine and ended as a disease. It's a sin that will die with her body."

"I have a great deal of parochial experience, Mr. Bennet, but I assure you that my way of administering a parish is totally different from yours."

"Then it's a mercy you're no longer a parish priest," said Mr. Bennet in his heart; "but you'll probably do even more harm as a Bishop."

His lips were silent, but they must have moved, for the Bishop said:

"I beg your pardon, what was it you were saying?"

"I said nothing, my Lord."

He felt alarmed at having betrayed his inward voice even so little. Suppose the time came when he could no longer control it. . . .

"My dear friend, do let us talk quietly and reasonably about these things," pleaded his superior. "We ought to view the situation in the abstract, not in its application to exceptional cases."

"The situation in the abstract seems to me just this, my Lord. You think that the people of this country are so pious that their devotion wants holding back, keeping from excesses. So you draw up rules that make religion more difficult for them. It's easy enough to get 'tabioca pudding' in this Church, but when a few exceptional people want the Bread of Life instead, they're treated like criminals—like criminals, I repeat."

"How can you say such a thing!"

"Well, they're put in chains like criminals, and get no encouragement from the very people that ought to be thanking God that they exist, even one or two in a parish."

"You should not speak in this way, Mr. Bennet. I beg you to control yourself."

The concrete and personal shore was proving as unsafe as the theological sea. The Bishop and Mr. Bennet faced each other uneasily. The Rector's hands were shaking as he gripped the arms of his chair. He wished the Bishop would go, and leave him alone. His arguments only worried him.

"My dear friend," pleaded Maidstone again, "don't let me feel I've wasted three hours of my rather valuable time in coming to see you like this. I could easily have written to you and said that if you refuse to obey diocesan law you cannot expect to be helped by diocesan funds. But, as I have already told you, I prefer persuasion to command."

"Threat you mean," said Mr. Bennet in his heart—"I wish you'd stop pulling that gaff over me, all about your valuable time and your friendly persuasion. I'm sick of it. I wish you'd stopped at home. What about my valuable time that's being wasted now?"

The Bishop was talking during an interval that he imagined to be an interval of silence, but the Rector scarcely heard what he said. A question suddenly reached him:

"Now, won't you trust me?"

"Not an inch."

He had not meant to say it, but it had come out.

The Bishop looked hurt and surprised.

"Really, Mr. Bennet, you are receiving me very strangely. What would the undivided Church have to say about such words to your Father-in-God?"

"I'm sorry, my Lord," Mr. Bennet managed to say, "but you and I will never agree. So, as you say, we're only wasting your time."

"I can't believe the situation is so desperate as all that. We came to a settlement before—why can't we go back to it?"

"Because that settlement was a betrayal of one of my people."

The Bishop fought for patience.

"I have told you all I feel about that. I'm sorry, bitterly sorry that it should have happened. But I've already tried to show you that it's unlikely—almost impossible that it should happen again. Besides, what we have to consider is the greatest good of the greatest number. The individual must sometimes be sacrificed for the welfare of the majority."

"It is expedient that one man should die for the people."

"Quite so . . . at least—" he had suddenly remembered the context—"we're talking of something rather different."

"No, we're not. We're talking of that very thing. We're talking of how we can sacrifice the good and holy to bolster up the respectabilities of official religion. You kill my saints as you've always killed them. Caiaphas!"

There was a moment of complete silence. Mr. Bennet felt curiously giddy and shaken. He must be careful or he would be uttering his thoughts out loud . . . why didn't the Bishop speak? . . . He looked across at him as he sat there opposite, and as he looked at his face, he knew. Those words had not been in his heart. He had spoken them out loud.

The Bishop's face was white, and his hands shook

nearly as much as Mr. Bennet's. Then, still shaking, he rose to his feet.

"This interview is ended. Dignity forbids me to prolong it any further. You have forgotten yourself entirely."

A giddy defiance seized Mr. Bennet.

"On the contrary, my Lord, I've spoken from my heart."

"You have spoken disgracefully—unworthily. . . . I cannot compel you to resign, but if you have any self-respect you will do so after this. Anyhow, I refuse to have any more personal dealings with you, and your grant from the diocese is stopped."

Two very angry old men, they faced each other for a moment. Then the Bishop turned and walked out, leaving Mr. Bennet standing in the middle of the room.

12

Well, that was that, as the new generation in the village said . . . a ridiculous interview—really a ridiculous interview . . . wasting everybody's time, and nothing gained—nothing really said . . . the Bishop was quite unfit for office—knew nothing about modern parish work and couldn't stand plain speaking . . . losing his temper like that, and all for a few plain words . . . of course he ought not to have said them —not out loud . . . but he was glad he had spoken, let the Bishop hear the truth for once. If only those

men knew what the parish clergy thought of them . . . Caiaphas! . . . ridiculous interview—ridiculous interview.

There was a roar of a starting engine, and the Bishop's car went rustling down the drive. Mr. Bennet moved shakily to the window and opened it. The place felt terribly hot and stuffy. He could scarcely breathe. . . . He would go into the drawing-room; it would be cooler in there. Here it seemed as if all the fresh air had been used up in argument. He really felt quite ill . . . but in the drawing-room he could sit and rest and breathe freely.

Tea was already laid, in the anomalous recess of the Gothic bow. The breeze was fluttering the curtains, and there was a pleasant smell of new mown grass blowing in from the Rectory lawn. But Mr. Bennet still did not feel well—his hands were shaking and he had a queer sensation of sickness and giddiness. It was the Bishop's fault—talking such ridiculous, unpastoral nonsense . . . ridiculous interview—really a preposterous interview. But he didn't feel well—not at all well. He sat down in one of the chintz-covered armchairs that had been pulled up to the table. The rest of the room seemed to recede out of the sunlight, the corners filling themselves with shadows. Moved by a sudden sense of fear and loneliness, he rang the bell.

The sound went, ghostly and untoward, through the silent house. Neither Mr. Bennet nor his wife had

been in the habit of ringing bells, and Emily came running in from the kitchen with a scared look on her face.

"Emily," said Mr. Bennet. He had meant to ask her for a glass of water, but his mind suddenly became disobedient. It broke its long partnership with his tongue, and refused to supply the words he wanted.

"Emily—bring me a—a kettle."

He had managed to say it. . . . No, it was not quite right. What was the word he wanted?

"Here, you know what I mean. Bring me a—Bible. No, I . . ."

He stared at her miserably and she stared at him. Her mouth dropped open, and he suddenly thought what an empty, idiotic face she had . . . staring at him like that and unable to help him . . . and she was all he had to help him now, all he had to live with him and look after him. Oh, Lucy, Lucy! . . .

He suddenly cried out: "Go away!"

She fled.

He realised then that he had spoken violently, he had frightened her. He ought not to have spoken to the poor thing like that. He was getting to be a violent old man, shouting and scaring people. And he had spoken most unbecomingly to the Bishop—he saw that now. He had been right in his principles, but wrong in his behaviour—very wrong. Oh, that besetting sin. . . . Lord, forgive my sinful tongue. It deserves to suffer, and lose its power.

But his power had now returned. He called the words and they came to him. . . . Bring me a glass of water. Yes, that was right. But he would not ring for Emily again—he had frightened her too badly, poor soul, and must give her time to recover. Besides, he felt better—much better; and George would be here soon, and they would have tea.

His mind, more steady now, reviewed the last hour or two. Yes, he had burned his boats. . . . One hundred and fifty pounds a year. He would have to manage on that, and it wouldn't be much. When he'd paid Emily her thirty pounds, and the wages of the boy who helped him struggle with the garden, and the rates, and his insurance premium—there wouldn't be much more than eighty pounds left for food and clothing, as well as fuel and light, and any necessary repairs and odd expenses. . . . He'd have to send away Emily—oh, no, he couldn't do that. She'd never get another place, foolish as she was, and he could not manage without her—all alone in this big house. He would sack the boy—that would save five shillings a week, and he could manage the garden. Perhaps he could grow vegetables and sell them. . . . But he would have to be careful—exceedingly careful.

He pulled a used envelope out of his pocket, and began to scratch figures on it; but his thoughts soon wandered. . . . What would his churchwardens say to all this? Would they stand by him? They wouldn't be pleased at so much money being lost, and the parish

being under discipline, with no visits from the Bishop, whom they all liked . . . and Mrs. Millington would be furious, and take away all her guineas and half-crowns. Well, let her do so. He had no use for her really. She was a wicked, silly old woman who—no he mustn't let himself get angry again. . . . But souls were worth more than money, and his business was to take care of souls, not to worry about ways and means. . . . His people would never see that. They would think him merely violent and obstructive. He ought to have taught them the faith more clearly. He had fought for the faith, but had he taught it?

The Bishop had sneered at his solitary sick communion—only one old woman, and she'd soon be dead. How was it that he had so few elect souls among his children? Mrs. Body was the last of them. When she died there would be nobody—no elect soul who preferred the Bread of Life to tabioca pudding. The elect souls were gone—Lucy, Mrs. Iggulsden, old Spong, with Mrs. Body soon to follow. Had he failed because they had gone on ahead of him, leaving him alone? . . . "They are all gone into a world of light." . . . Yes, he had failed. He had failed. There ought to be a crowd of eager young souls pressing on in the tracks of the old ones—all the Ernies and Maudies and Mabels and Freds and Neds of the parish. There ought to have been Theresa Silk . . . but no man cared for her soul.

"Feed my lambs"—oh, where were the lambs? Lord,

forgive thine unworthy shepherd, who has brought thee only a few old sheep. The lambs have sought other pastures, and the wolf took one of them. . . . Only a few old folk. . . . But they are thine, thou carest for them . . . a few old folk—no young ones. . . . There's George Heasman, but he's outside the covenant, outside the fold, a vagabond shepherd with a flock of wild goats. Yet wilt thou not accept him and receive him? for he's all I have that's young to offer thee . . .

13

He sat staring before him into the corners of the room, which were growing dark again. He was feeling sick, and his limbs were strangely heavy, but he would not ring for Emily. No, he need not trouble her—she was no use, and Lucy would be in quite soon—Lucy would bring him anything he wanted, and cheer and comfort him, and make him feel well again. He wouldn't feel so lonely, so frightened and lonely . . . as he felt now, with the shadows creeping towards him out of the corners of the room—out of the corners of his mind. . . .

But she would never come back; she was dead. He knew now that she was dead. He would go to her, but she could not return to him. He had often expected her like this before, though not so deliberately and consciously—looking for her to come in when he

sat alone at his tea-table. But she had never come. She would never come. She was dead.

He saw that the table was laid for two . . . this seemed strange. He stared at it, and saw two plates, two cups, two spoons. There were cakes in the stand, besides the bread and butter he ate when he was alone. Perhaps, then, she was coming, after all. . . . Emily would not have laid a place for her if she was dead. . . . He had dreamed before this that she was dead, and wakened to find her beside him. She could not be dead; he had only dreamed. . . . He was dreaming still; he would wake up and find her there. . . . Or was he awake already, after a long sleep? He felt mazed and heavy, as he so often felt after sleep. What had he been dreaming of all this afternoon?

George Heasman . . . no, that was nonsense; George had gone off to Newbury—been packed off, to prevent his marrying Theresa Silk. How queer it was that he couldn't remember things. He felt all mixed up. When Lucy came in he would get her to explain to him exactly what had happened . . . George was coming to tea . . . the Gospel Hall at Goudhurst. . . . No, he had dreamed that. It wasn't real. He had dreamed it all. He had gone to sleep in the afternoon and slept too long. Lucy had sometimes scolded him for that. The Bishop had been to see him . . . no that was another dream. The Bishop would never have come to see him. He wished he could get this clear—which of his memories were dreams and which

were not. It was all very trying and confusing. He had never felt like this before—so drowsy and muddled. . . . Was he ill? Was some terrible change taking place in his body? He felt now as if his limbs were made of lead—he could not move in his chair. He could not ring for Emily now if he wanted. . . . Lord, remember me. . . . All those queer, doleful, frightening dreams at the back of his mind. . . .

Then suddenly he saw her standing near him—his Lucy, come at last. In his relief he could have cried for joy. There she stood, just the same as ever, though he could not be sure whether she was the same as when he had first known and loved her or the same as she had been in those last, faded wintry years. . . . He would have spoken to her, but no words would come. Would she understand what had happened? Would she be able to help him now that he was so ill? He thought she had come in to have tea with him, but the next moment she was in the doorway, going out.

He rose up and followed her, all his sickness and heaviness forgotten. In the hall he saw George Heasman coming towards the drawing-room door with Emily, but he had no time to speak to him, and the young man did not seem to expect it. . . . Lucy moved quickly over the lawn, down towards the trees. At the edge of the long shadows that they cast she turned and waited for him.

George Heasman came briskly into the room.

"Good evening, Mr. Bennet. I'm afraid I'm a little late, Sir, but——"

His voice broke off as he came close to the figure in the chair. It sat in a queer, huddled attitude, breathing stertorously.

"He's ill!" cried George, and sprang towards the door—"Hi! you—Miss—girl—Hi! Your master's been taken ill!"

Emily appeared suddenly like a ghost out of the shadows of the hall.

"He's gone," she said in a flat voice—"he's gone."

"No—he isn't dead. But he's uncommon bad—run and fetch your doctor, quick. That's a good girl."

But by the time that Dr. Gilpin had been hunted on his round, and found at Marsh Quarter, and brought to the Rectory, Mr. Bennet was dead, in the arms of the vagabond shepherd. . . . He never recovered consciousness, and he spoke only once, and then it was impossible to make out what he said, though one word sounded like "dream."

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Shepherds in Sackcloth

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SHEPHERDS IN SACKCLOTH

Sheila Kaye-Smith